

Oliver Pejić

Contesting the Habsburg Empire in Everyday Life: The Habsburg Legacy as a Source of Everyday Conflict in Interwar Yugoslav Society

Abstract: In the aftermath of the First World War, a sizable part of the former Habsburg Empire ended up within the borders of the newly established Yugoslav nation-state. While the zeitgeist of the new “national” world demanded that Yugoslavia’s population should unanimously reject the defunct empire’s legacy, popular attitudes towards the previous regime among the state’s diverse inhabitants were more ambivalent. Employing archival records from the Regional Courts of Maribor (Slovenia) and Sombor (Serbia), this chapter explores how discussions of the Habsburg Empire functioned as a source of everyday conflict between predominantly non-elite actors in interwar Yugoslav society. In such interpersonal clashes, references to the bygone empire served a diverse array of discursive functions. The characterization of people or institutions as “Habsburg” functioned as a form of boundary-drawing and othering within Yugoslav society, and nostalgic references to the imperial past figured as conscious polemical counterpoints in critical discussions of the national present. While comparisons between Habsburg and Yugoslav rule remained frequent in discussions throughout the interwar period, non-elite actors rarely reflected on the differences between empire and nation-state on an abstract level. Instead, their attitudes towards either regime were typically rooted in their subjective experiences within very local contexts.

Introduction

By this point, it can hardly be considered a methodological rarity for historians to use court documents, police records, and denunciations as sources for gaining insight into the mental worlds of less visible historical actors who have otherwise

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to the editors of this volume for their useful comments and corrections. The research for this paper was supported by the scholarship grant for study at the European University Institute awarded by the Public Scholarship, Development, Disability, and Maintenance Fund of the Republic of Slovenia.

left behind few written traces in the archival records.¹ While such documents have been employed to tackle a wide range of research topics, they have also seen productive use in the historical study of nationalism and nationhood from below.² Within the wider context of Central and Eastern Europe, one of the most consequential turning points for the historical development of nationalism was by all means the conclusion of the Great War in 1918. Europe's old contiguous empires under Habsburg, Ottoman, Romanov, and Hohenzollern rule collapsed, and their authority abruptly came to be replaced by that of newly established or expanded nation-states. The wider repercussions of this political transformation were immense; in the words of Natasha Wheatley, "[t]here was no international handbook for unmaking imperial sovereignty. That project – of forging and then managing sovereignty after empire – turned Central Europe into the ground zero of the new international order."³

One representative post-imperial polity that had made its first appearance on the European political map around this time was the Yugoslav nation-state. Established on 1 December 1918 as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and officially renamed as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia roughly ten years later, it included within its borders territories that had historically belonged to both Austrian and Hungarian halves of the Habsburg Monarchy as well as to the Ottoman Empire.⁴ While South Slavic nationalist activists in the state's formerly Habsburg northern territories celebrated the collapse of the preceding imperial order as a moment of national liberation, it was not always easy for them to "unmake imperial sovereignty" in the hearts and minds of the state's wider population. With political and economic instability strongly shaping people's lived experiences in the immediate post-war years, a considerable number of the state's inhabitants began to look back at life under the preceding imperial regime as a time of stability and relative prosperity.

1 For in-depth theoretical and methodological reflections on this topic, see Ilya Gerasimov, *Plebeian Modernity: Social Practices, Illegality, and the Urban Poor in Russia, 1906-1916* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), 1–54.

2 An exhaustive methodological and historiographical overview was most recently provided by Ágoston Berecz in his article "How to Study Early Popular Engagement with Nationalism: Sources, Strategies, Research Traditions," *Hungarian Historical Review* 12, no. 1 (2023): 3–36.

3 Natasha Wheatley, "Central Europe as Ground Zero of the New International Order," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 4 (2019): 901.

4 Interwar Yugoslavia's formerly Ottoman territories had already been conquered by the Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro during the First Balkan War in 1912–13. The two kingdoms themselves had formally gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. See Marie-Janine Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia*, trans. Dona Geyer, Central European Studies (West Lafayette, ID: Purdue University Press, 2019), 51–54.

Given that Yugoslavia's inhabitants had conflicting emotional investments in the new state, it is thus hardly surprising that their interactions sometimes escalated into open conflict, ultimately leading to denunciation and legal persecution. Fortunately for the historian, when such conflicts did reach the courts, they would also leave behind useful archival traces. While court records demand a cautious and contextualized reading as much as any other source and were necessarily shaped by the wider institutional and social contexts in which they were produced, denunciations and court proceedings nevertheless recorded first-person utterances and the political self-positioning of lower- or middle-class actors at a level of detail provided by few other contemporary sources.⁵ This chapter draws from such court cases in order to explore how the post-imperial transition was understood and contested by predominantly non-elite actors in Lower Styria and the Bačka – two former Habsburg territories of the interwar Yugoslav state. Primarily employing criminal cases from the Regional Courts of Maribor/Marburg an der Drau (today in Slovenia) and Sombor/Zombor (today in Serbia), it shows how references to the by-gone Habsburg Empire served a diverse array of discursive functions within contemporary conflicts in two formerly Austrian and Hungarian provinces during the first ten years of Yugoslav rule.

While the history of nationalism and political loyalty in a wider sense has remained a leitmotif in the historiography on interwar Yugoslavia, relatively few researchers have approached this topic by looking beyond the sphere of organized party politics, with studies thus remaining methodologically conservative and often replicating essentialist notions of groupness.⁶ As has already been men-

5 Like any other source, interrogations and testimonies ought to be interpreted with "caution and must be read in context, since people, especially peasants, could go to great lengths to dissimulate, feign ignorance, and find out what the interviewer wanted to hear." See Berecz, "Early Popular Engagement with Nationalism," 12. At the same time, interpretive obstacles are inherent to all source types. In the words of Maarten Van Ginderachter, "[s]ources produced by commoners are certainly not unmediated voices. Yet neither are they more problematic than sources from other social circles. . . . Source criticism and a clear contextualization of one's records within their historic background are a must in every case." See "Nationhood from Below: Some Historiographic Notes on Great Britain, France and Germany in the Long Nineteenth Century," in *Nationhood from below: Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Maarten Van Ginderachter and Marnix Beyen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 123.

6 To quote Filip Erdeljac, "[t]he historical literature on twentieth century Yugoslavia has, with a few notable exceptions, remained immune to the contributions of scholars of 'national indifference' who have exposed the inadequacy of oversimplified dichotomies in which supposed 'national prisons' generated widespread resistance from full nationalized subjects." See Filip Erdeljac, "Between Nationalism and Indifference: The Gradual Elimination of Indifference in Interwar Yugoslavia," in *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe*, ed. Maarten Van Ginderachter and Jon Fox (London: Routledge, 2019), 107.

tioned, however, historians of nationalism have increasingly been writing the history of nationalist mobilization from below, i.e., by shifting their attention towards non-elite actors.⁷ Their analyses typically understand nationhood not as a stable and consistent form of identity, but rather as a functionalist, pragmatic, or situational phenomenon.⁸ Even if this chapter is not primarily focused on nationhood, its interpretative framework remains strongly informed by methodological insights from the previously described tradition in nationalism studies. With the source material itself largely narrating tales of situational encounters, it appears only logical that a similar perspective should prove just as useful for the study of imperial loyalty as another context-dependent form of groupness.

The Transition from “Imperial” to “National” Rule in Post-Habsburg Yugoslavia

Military defeats, coupled with widespread hunger and instability, eventually led to the Habsburg Monarchy’s final collapse in late October 1918. As this process was unfolding, politicians throughout the monarchy’s former territories established unelected “national councils” to overtake the state functions of the dying empire.⁹ On 29 October 1918, most of the Empire’s majority-South-Slav provinces thus became part of an independent State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, with this short-lived polity eventually merging with the Kingdom of Serbia on 1 December to form the

7 According to one definition, this category includes “those people who are usually not actively or consciously engaged in concerted, organized nation-building strategies, or who are supposed to play a rather executory role (e.g., lower middle-class bureaucrats) in nationalizing policies designed by others.” See Marnix Beyen and Maarten Van Genderachter, “General Introduction: Writing the Mass into a Mass Phenomenon,” in *Nationhood from below: Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Maarten Van Genderachter and Marnix Beyen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9–10.

8 A situationist approach to the study of nationhood and/or ethnicity has been most clearly formulated by historian Gábor Egry. Proposing the concept of “everyday ethnicity,” he describes it as a “phenomenon connected to the “people” and to contexts that are rarely associated with nationalist politics. However, quite often the trigger of ethnicity is a politicized understanding of an event or an interaction, but this politicization is not the revelation of an already existing, latent national identity but rather a momentary occurrence that could just as easily disappear as it could remain.” See Gábor Egry, “Beyond Politics: National Indifference as Everyday Ethnicity,” in *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe*, ed. Maarten Van Genderachter and Jon Fox (London: Routledge, 2019), 148–49.

9 Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 431–41.

Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.¹⁰ While a new state may have thus been established, widespread political insecurity did not cease until years later. The state's northern border with German-Austrian Styria was secured early on through a daring military operation, but it only became permanent with the signing of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye on 10 September 1919. In nearby Carinthia, however, violent clashes between Yugoslav and Austrian troops persisted until the region's fate was decided via plebiscite in 1920. In the same year, the borders with Hungary and Italy were finally settled with the Treaties of Trianon and Rapallo.¹¹

The courts in Maribor/Marburg an der Drau and Sombor/Zombor were regional courts, and their jurisdiction covered territories that had been part of the historic Austrian crownland of Styria and the Hungarian Bács-Bodrog County.¹² Both these territories were characterised by considerable linguistic and, in the case of the Bács-Bodrog County, also confessional diversity.¹³ More importantly, however, their populations had been accustomed to divergent top-down approaches towards the question of nationality. In the Empire's Austrian half, multinationalism was officially acknowledged and constitutionally projected, but administrative practices often fell short in practically protecting non-dominant linguistic rights and pre-

10 For English-language overviews of this process, see e.g. Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 127–40; Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia*, 65–67.

11 On the border settlements between Yugoslavia and its neighbours, see Calic, *A History of Yugoslavia*, 72; Oto Luthar, ed., *The Land between: A History of Slovenia*, second, revised edition (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 378–79.

12 The official terms for these courts were *okrožno sodišče* in Slovene, *okružni sud* in Serbian and Croatian, *Kreisgericht* in German, and *kerületi bíróság* (*királyi törvényszék*) in Hungarian. Occupying the middle level on the judicial hierarchy, they stood between the district courts and the courts of appeal. During Habsburg times, the Regional Court of Maribor covered eight district courts in historical Styria. After the establishment of Yugoslavia, its judicial authority was extended over Yugoslav Carinthia in its varying borders and to formerly Hungarian Prekmurje/Muravidék. The Regional Court of Sombor would also experience a similar expansion of judicial authority in the aftermath of the war. It had initially covered four district courts in Bačka, but between 1919 and 1930, it was also competent for courts in the formerly Hungarian region of Međimurje/Muraköz in modern-day Croatia. See Gordana Drakić, "Sudska vlast i stanje u sudovima na području Vojvodine 1920–1921. godine," *Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta, Novi Sad* 43, no. 1 (2009): 189–202.

13 According to the 1921 Yugoslav population census, the provinces of Bačka and Baranja had a combined population of 784,569 people. The largest religious communities included Roman Catholics (61,75%), Orthodox Christians (21,25%), Evangelical Christians (13,45%), Jews (1,84%) and Greek Catholics (1,56%). The most commonly declared mother languages were Serbian or Croatian (44,42%), Hungarian (35,39%), German (24,22%), and Czechoslovak (3,96%). See *Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 31 januara 1921 god.* (Sarajevo: Državna štamparija, 1932), 354–55.

venting nationalist discrimination.¹⁴ Conversely, Hungarian elites understood their kingdom as a Hungarian nation-state housing one unitary civic Hungarian political nation. While the law offered limited protection for the protection of minority languages, it did not question the ascendancy and dominant status of the Hungarian language. The state saw its spread as politically desirable and openly pursued policies aimed at cultural homogenisation.¹⁵

In both Lower Styria and the Bačka, the majority population had spoken South Slavic languages and would have been recognised by contemporaries as belonging to the titular Yugoslav nationality. However, “objective” ethnolinguistic belonging did not necessarily teleologically translate into a corresponding nationalist worldview. In late Habsburg Lower Styria, German-nationalist parties retained their power for longer compared to neighbouring Carniola and were also successful at keeping part of the local Slovene-speaking population indifferent towards the goals of mainstream Slovene nationalist activism.¹⁶ In the Bačka, and especially among the region’s non-Serbian population, an underdeveloped native-language educational system combined with an almost complete absence of minority-nationalist political mobilisation contributed to the fact that local society was not particularly antagonistic towards Hungarian cultural homogenisation.¹⁷ As these territories came under Yugoslav rule, many of their inhabitants found it difficult to see the intrinsic worth of their own purported national liberation. With the previous Habsburg regime appearing as a natural frame of reference, it was rather typical that the imperial past should often arise as a point of comparison in contemporary discussions and assessments of life in the new, national present.

14 On the legal protection of national and linguistic rights in Austria, see Hannelore Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachgerechtigkeit im österreichischen Unterrichtswesen 1867-1918* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1995); Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs, 1848-1918* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985).

15 For a recent survey on the principles and practical implementation of Hungarian minority legislation, see Ágoston Berecz, “The Hungarian Nationalities Act of 1868 in Operation (1868–1914),” *Slavic Review* 81, no. 4 (2022): 994–1015.

16 For a German-language overview of Lower Styrian political history under late Habsburg rule, see Janez Cvirn, *Das ‘Festungsdreieck’: zur politischen Orientierung der Deutschen in der Untersteiermark (1861-1914)*, *Forschungen zur geschichtlichen Landeskunde der Steiermark*, Band 76 (Wien: LIT, 2016).

17 High illiteracy rates among the Roman Catholic South Slavs, i.e., the Bunjevac and Šokac communities, made modern nationalist mobilization even more difficult. The 1921 census in Subotica/Szabadka, Bačka’s largest city, revealed a meagre 38.8% literacy rate among those inhabitants who had declared Bunjevac as their native language. See Đorđe Popović Munjatović, *Subotica 1922* (Subotica: Knjižara “Jedinstvo,” 1922), 5.

Habsburg Nostalgia between Contemporary Discontent and Civilizational Prejudice

Perhaps one of the most palpable ways in which Yugoslavia's population felt the presence of the new Yugoslav state was through the institution of military service. Given the wider geopolitical context of the immediate post-war period, the fact that the state's population was not always particularly keen on fulfilling this civic duty can hardly come as a surprise. The traumatic experience of the First World War lowered morale significantly, and the Yugoslav army was engaged in an on-going pacification campaign in its southern provinces. In Lower Styria and Carinthia, the prospects of dying in battle against Albanian insurgents seemed all the less appealing when people were aware that the republican government in neighbouring German Austria had freed its citizens of obligatory service.¹⁸

The preserved records from the Regional Court of Maribor show that 1921 was a year in which an extraordinary number of people had been tried for making remarks of anti-state character that were indirectly related to military service. As can be discerned from the cases themselves, the trigger for such incriminating statements were rumours of incoming mobilisation. One representative example of such an interaction involved two hired hands in the village of Limbuš near Ruše in the Maribor district. The denunciator, a 38-year-old farmworker named Simon Kovačič, had explained in his interrogation that his co-worker Franc Verdnik/Franz Vernik¹⁹ had returned one night from Maribor with the following news:

[He was] telling me that Yugoslav lads are going to have to be drafted to the army. I told him that this is no big deal because they used to be drafted back when we weren't even around; we were also drafted; and they're going to be drafted when we'll be long gone. Verdnik replied to this that it used to be different when we had our own emperor but now, we don't have him anymore. I then answered him by saying that we now have our Slovene king, to which Franc Vednik said: What's this Serbian king good for, he's a cunt [*to je pizda*]²⁰

¹⁸ Indeed, Ivo Banac has argued that Austria's lack of obligatory military service had been one of the key factors that had swayed Slovene speakers in Carinthia to vote for Austrian rule in the 1920 plebiscite. See Ivo Banac, "Was the Albanian Opposition to the Serb Kingdom's Annexation in 1912 without Justification?," in *The Case for Kosova: Passage to Independence*, ed. Anna Di Lelio (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 56.

¹⁹ In line with contemporary practice, courts often translated or orthographically Slavicized non-Slavic names and, at times, even surnames without taking individual preferences or practices into consideration. If the sources contain multiple versions of an individual's name, I make sure to include all of them in the text.

²⁰ Interrogation of Simon Kovačič, 3 May 1921, document 5, folder Vr VII 1091/21, box 75, Okrožno sodišče Maribor (1898-1941), Pokrajinski arhiv Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia (= PAM). All translations are my own.

Kovačič reported that this was not the first time that he had heard Verdnik making questionable statements. At a later point, he had heard him saying that “things are slowly going to get better and the scarcity [*draginja*] will end, but by that point there’s also not going to be a Yugoslavia anymore.”²¹ He had also made similar remarks when Charles I of Austria had travelled to Hungary to attempt a restoration of the throne, saying that “[w]e, too, are now going to come under Charles, and the scarcity will pass.”²² In Kovačič’s own words, the reason why he had decided to denounce Verdnik was because he was a “Germanophile [*nemškutar*] by conviction and has always teased me because of my national consciousness.”²³

The court eventually summoned the farm owner Feliks/Srečko Robič for testimony. The latter had characterized Kovačič as “a very hardworking person, but with very bad hearing. However, he has been interested in the new state of things in the country and reads newspapers every Sunday.”²⁴ While Robič claimed that Verdnik “had certainly suffered during the war,” he had also never heard him make any subversive remarks against the state.²⁵ Indeed, the court appears to have gained a similar impression of Verdnik’s political record, and concluded that “[t]he accused does not belong to any political party and never dabbles with politics, does not go to political meetings, and is always home on Sundays. The witness has never heard the accused express himself against the state or against the dynasty. He does not read newspapers. If anything, he may be considered [nationally] unconscious.”²⁶ Since Kovačič suffered from hearing issues and had denounced his coworker only months later, the court understood this as an act of revenge and ultimately pardoned Verdnik of all accusations.

While both Verdnik and Kovačič shared similar social backgrounds, their interaction offers an illustrative example of conflicting value judgments regarding the post-imperial transition during early Yugoslav rule. Unlike his disillusioned coworker, Kovačič attempted to stay in touch with contemporary political developments and appears to have also internalized the basic tenet that hardship and sacrifice under the new Yugoslav regime was justified out of national considerations. It is worth noting here that these hardships were hardly miniscule as crip-

21 Interrogation of Simon Kovačič.

22 Interrogation of Simon Kovačič.

23 Interrogation of Simon Kovačič. “Germanophile” was a pejorative term used to refer to pro-German people of Slovene ethnic background.

24 Main discussion, 24 June 1921, document 15, folder Vr VII 1091/21, box 75, Okrožno sodišče Maribor (1898-1941), PAM.

25 Main discussion, 24 June 1921.

26 Main discussion, 2 December 1921, document 32, folder Vr VII 1091/21, box 75, Okrožno sodišče Maribor (1898-1941), PAM.

pling inflation and material shortages would characterise life in Yugoslavia until as late as 1923.²⁷ Taking this into account, it is hardly surprising that many people such as Verdnik remained unconvinced that having a “national” regime should outweigh the existential issues which they had been facing in everyday life. Furthermore, in denying his coworker’s characterisation of the new ruler as “our Slovene king,” he was also directly subverting Yugoslavia’s claim towards his loyalty as member of the titular nationality.

A further court case from the same year that was likewise triggered by rumours of mobilisation took place in one of Maribor’s pubs and involved Franc Krajnc/Franz Kreinz, a 47-year-old wall painter and veteran from Krčevina near Ptuj. One of the patrons had denounced Kreinz for saying that “[w]e have no business in Albania, we don’t give a damn about Serbs, we’re Styrians . . . *Wenn einzurücken sein wird, werden wir hinauf einrücken, nicht hinunter* [pointing with his finger towards the south].”²⁸ The innkeeper testified to hearing Kreinz say that Serbs were uncultured and that “you should go up (to Austria) if you’d like to see culture. If you didn’t also know German, you’d be just as much of a cretin as the Serbs down there.”²⁹ When the gendarmes apprehended him following the denunciation and asked whether the accusations were true, he replied straightforwardly that “[t]his may indeed be the case – *es wird ja allgemein so gesprochen!*”³⁰

Like Verdnik and many other contemporaries, Krainz was evidently unwilling to fulfil his civic duties to the new Yugoslav nation-state. At the same time, his comments regarding the civilising quality of the German language also reveal an interesting cultural-civilizational dimension. Indeed, the use of the Habsburg legacy as a form of civilizational-boundary drawing and Othering had been a ubiquitous feature of interwar Yugoslav political discourse and may be encountered in numerous other contemporary cases in both territories under consideration. People and institutions were characterized as “being” Habsburg in contemporary discourse for the purposes of both positive and negative forms of boundary drawing. When used in a positive sense, such characterisations established an in-group identity among Yugoslavia’s former Habsburg inhabitants in opposition to the state’s post-Ottoman

27 According to one state-wide estimate, “in 1923 prices were almost twenty times higher compared to 1913. While in 1913 the dinar was equal in worth to the Swiss franc in Zurich, ten years later, in January 1923, it was 27 times less worth than the Swiss franc[.]” See Dragana Gnjatović, “Evolution of Economic Thought on Monetary Reform in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after the Great War,” *Balkanica*, no. 51 (2020): 185.

28 Report no. 978, 30 October 1921, document 4, folder Vr IX 2202/21, box 83, Okrožno sodišče Maribor 1898-1941, PAM.

29 Interrogation of witnesses, 11 November 1921, document Vr IX 2202/21–9.

30 Interrogation of Ivan Vrečko, 26 November 1921, document Vr IX 2202/21–12.

core. Quite predictably, this binary opposition necessarily relied on contemporary Orientalist notions of Serbian backwardness and civilisational inferiority.

A typical example of such perceptions may be discerned from the case against Franjo/Franz Ciber, who had been prosecuted by the Regional Court of Sombor in 1925. A 29-year-old labourer from Slovenia who was now working in the village of Bogojevo in the Bačka, he had been engaged in a discussion with locals regarding the state of military barracks throughout the country. Upon hearing someone say that the military barracks in Slovenia were in better shape, he replied that “[u]nder Austria, these lands used to be one cultured state, but now they’re a Gypsy state; Gypsies live in this current state of ours.”³¹ On a different occasion, he also reacted upon the news that supporters of Stjepan Radić had been arrested in nearby Senta by saying that he wished he could have joined them “so that we could jointly proclaim a republic and shake off the shackles of the Serbian state from the necks of the Slovene and Croat nations!”³²

In his defence, Ciber did not deny the accusations that he had made civilizational comments against Yugoslav rule. Quite tellingly, however, he claimed that his volatile remarks were triggered by his meagre living standards under the current regime. According to his testimony, he had been “outraged because of my frequent and pointless transfers, as well as because of the high living costs and low salaries.”³³ A further aspect to consider when interpreting Ciber’s statements against Serbs and Serbian rule was also his support for Stjepan Radić’s Croatian Peasant Party.³⁴ Known for its republican opposition against the centralist monarchy, the party’s critical discourse oftentimes took the form of civilisational chauvinism against Serbs in its more vulgar forms.

Cases from the Regional Court of Sombor make clear that Croatian Peasant Party activists at times attempted to mobilize local non-Slavic minorities by framing Serbians as a common enemy for the indigenous population regardless of their ethnic background. In 1927, the party had held a rally in a Hungarian-speaking village in the region of Baranja. The speaker, Matija Kolar, addressed the crowd in Hungarian and told it that “Vojvodina [the formerly Hungarian regions in today’s northern Serbia, O.P.] is ours and Serbs have nothing to look for in it, and if they want to live in Serbia, then let them go to Serbia.”³⁵ Quite predict-

31 Sentence against Franjo Ciber, 31 July 1925, document 428/25, folder 73.113 K.428/1925, F. 73, Okružni sud Sombor (1919-1941), Istorijски arhiv Sombor (= IASo), Sombor, Serbia.

32 Sentence against Franjo Ciber.

33 Protocol with Franjo Ciber, 17 February 1925, document 27, folder 73.113 K.428/1925, F. 73, Okružni sud Sombor (1919-1941), IASo.

34 On Stjepan Radić, see e.g. Mark Biondich, “Stjepan Radić, Yugoslavism, and the Habsburg Monarchy,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 27 (January 1996): 109–31.

35 Indictment no. 6617/1927, document 207/2, folder 73.113 K. 2466/1927, F. 73, Okružni sud Sombor (1919-1941), IASo.

ably, the accused claimed in his appeal that his words did not refer to all Serbs, but rather just to the corrupt Serbian officials whom the government had sent to Vojvodina.³⁶ In Lower Styria, it was even common to see contemporaries speak of a pipeline leading from Germanophile sentiment in the late Habsburg period to support for Radić's party in the interwar years. In the same year, an innkeeper from Makole in Lower Styria had been heard "complaining about our high taxes, finally saying that today's government and kings aren't worth anything. He also added that it would be best if we'd belong to where we used to. . . . He is of German conviction and has always publicly displayed this. But after the overthrow [in 1918], he changed seats and became a supporter of Radić's party."³⁷

While the accused in the aforementioned cases criticized the new state on an abstract level, many other contemporary conflicts pitted locals against recent settlers whose arrival was tied to the policies of the new Yugoslav state. A typical example of such interactions was a case against Branko Cvejić, a Serb labourer from Sombor who had been tried by the local Regional Court in 1924. While drunk in an inn, he had exclaimed that "[y]ou *Srbijanci* [= Serbs from Serbia] would not even be here had this [land] not been betrayed, and it's not certain that you'll be staying for long either."³⁸ He concluded by saying that he, too, was a Serb, but that he used to be a "great Hungarian" before the war and remained one today. While Cvejić's nationally ambivalent behaviour was by no means exceptional for the time, it is evident that he was also keenly aware of its somewhat paradoxical nature considering his Serbian ethnic background. Claiming drunkenness during his defence, he asserted that he "could not have spoken the incriminating words because I, as a Yugoslav and Serbian patriot, was oppressed together with my family by the Hungarians back in in 1914."³⁹

While Cvejić's words were directed against *Srbijanci*, we notice that many of his contemporaries verbally attacked newcomers whose presence was seen as a part of the new Yugoslav order in a wider sense. In the Bačka, it was particularly common to see conflicts between natives and *dobrovoljci*, i.e., wartime volunteers to the Serbian army. As a reward for their service, the latter received land expropriated in the post-war agrarian reform and participated in a form of internal

³⁶ Matija Kolar's appeal, document 207/10.

³⁷ Interrogation of witnesses, 17 August 1927, document Z 88/27–7, folder Vr VIII 1265/27 Okrožno sodišče Maribor 1898–1941, PAM.

³⁸ Sentence against Branko Cvejić, 2 June 1925, document K.651/11.1924, folder 73.76 K.651/1924, F. 73, Okružni sud Sombor (1919–1941), IASo.

³⁹ Protocol with Branko Cvejić, 2 June 1925, document K.651/11.1924, folder 73.76 K.651/1924, F. 73, Okružni sud Sombor (1919–1941), IASo.

colonisation.⁴⁰ Since the Yugoslav agrarian reform had disproportionately favoured military volunteers and people from Serbia proper, a dividing line was drawn between them and the oftentimes excluded native population. In the village of Petlovac, the 66-year-old Andrija/Andreas Rupl was accused of offending his *dobrovoljac* neighbour when he had asked him why he had to come “here” if Serbia was the country for which he had sacrificed his life during the war: “[T]his is not Serbia, Serbia is in Albania. You’ve brought shame upon Hungary and come here, you *rac* [= Serbian]⁴¹ trash. . . . If you had put your head on the line for Serbia, then go to Serbia, not over here to Yugoslavia!”⁴²

Rupl appears to have used the word “Yugoslavia” to refer exclusively to the state’s former Habsburg territories, again implying their cultural cohesion vis-à-vis the old Serbian kingdom. At the same time, his main frame of reference for the pre-Yugoslav past was not the wider empire, but rather Hungary itself. Much like in the previously discussed case involving Cvejić, pro-Hungarian exclamations or historically revisionist statements make regular appearances in conflicts with new arrivals in local environments. Quite predictably, one possible channel for the latter’s frustrations with the current order was Hungarian revisionism and Habsburg legitimism. In 1922, a conversation between two women in the Baranja village of Laško escalated into a conflict when Stanka Marinac expressed outrage at the fact that her neighbour, Berta Korlatović, had recently received government land together with her husband through the agrarian reform. Reprimanding her for marrying a “stinking *Srbijanac*,” she exclaimed that “[t]his land is going to be Hungarian, it won’t stay Serbian.”⁴³ Her neighbour responded by saying that “king Alexander walks this soil” and that he will keep on doing so, to which Marinac retorted that “it’s not he who’s going to be here, but Charles’s son[.]”⁴⁴

If being Habsburg amounted to a positive frame of reference for some Yugoslavs, this form of discourse also had its South Slavic nationalist flipside. It was thus not uncommon to see people ideologically aligned with Yugoslav nationalism accuse others of being Austrian or Habsburg to imply that their behaviour was un-

40 On the agrarian reform in Central and Eastern Europe, see Dietmar Müller, *Bodeneigentum und Nation: Rumänien, Jugoslawien und Polen im Europäischen Vergleich: 1918-1948*, *Moderne Europäische Geschichte* 17 (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020).

41 *Rac* was an exonym traditionally used to refer to Orthodox (and occasionally Catholic) South Slavs in the Kingdom of Hungary. By the interwar period, it came to be seen as a pejorative term.

42 Sentence against Andrija Rupl, 14 December 1927, document K.926–6-1926, folder 73.155 K.926/1926, F. 73, Okružni sud Sombor (1919-1941), IASo.

43 Criminal charge against Franja Taraj and Stanka Marinac, document 494, 30 April 1922, folder 73.31 779/1922, F. 73 Okružni sud Sombor (1919-1941), IASo.

44 Criminal charge against Franja Taraj and Stanka Marinac.

patriotic or in line with the practices of the old regime. One such representative interaction took place in 1919 in the Styrian town of Ptuj, where two merchants from Ljubljana had the police called on them for causing a ruckus in one of the local hotels. A policeman involved in the arrest testified that the merchants “insulted us saying that we still have the Austrian system, that we only act against Slovenes, but never against Germans, that we favour the Germans, etc.”⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, this was also a discourse that was sometimes employed by Serbs and other South Slav newcomers in the Styrian environment. When Peter/Petar Mijović, a 40-year-old landowner from Drniš in Dalmatia, experienced a legal investigation in relation to a recent purchase of property in Maribor, he snapped at the gendarme who had come to interrogate him with the following words: “You know that I’m a Serb and that it’s wrong to write and report falsehoods in a democratic state . . . [y]ou still operate as if you were in Old Austria, I’m going to destroy you, if not in some other way, then with the help of the deputies and ministers.”⁴⁶

Finally, it is hardly surprising that the most rhetorically gifted outbursts of anti-Habsburg slander usually came from members of contemporary radical-right groups such as the Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists, i.e., the ORJUNA.⁴⁷ When its members were assembled in a Maribor inn in 1923, they had spouted the following abuse in the presence of the local police chief commissioner: “Who is this Kerševan? He’s a zero; he’s shit; he’s less than shit; he’s a do-no-good; he’s an *avstrijakant* [“Austrophile”], an anti-national element; a Germanophile; we’ll show him, etc.”⁴⁸ In this case, too, presumed Austrophile or Germanophile sympathies signalled that the accused was working against the interests of the national present. Since keeping order also necessarily involved the repression of excessively rowdy nationalist activists, it comes to no surprise that the latter should accuse the local police commissioner of Habsburg sympathies and a lacking national consciousness.

45 Protocol with Valentin Jelušič, 14 October 1919, folder 14/518, box 240, Mestna občina Ptuj, 1864–1941, Zgodovinski arhiv Ptuj (= ZAP), Ptuj, Slovenia.

46 Report to the public prosecutor in Maribor, 19 April 1921, document 1835/21, folder Vr VII 1109/21, box 75, Okrožno sodišče Maribor 1898–1941, PAM.

47 On the ORJUNA, see e.g. Boris Mlakar, “Radical Nationalism and Fascist Elements in Political Movements in Slovenia between the World Wars,” *Slovene Studies* 31, no. 1 (2009): 3–19.

48 Indictment against Ivan Škerjanc et al., 19 July 1923, document 1864/23, folder Vr VII 848/23, box 103, Okrožno sodišče Maribor 1898–1941, PAM.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a limited selection of court cases in which references to the Habsburg Empire eventually led to the interpersonal conflict and subsequent legal action. Spatial constraints prevent an exhaustive discussion of this phenomenon as the number of cases from the two regional courts that involved such references during the first ten years of Yugoslav rule runs into the dozens. This notwithstanding, the discussed examples allow for some wider conclusions regarding the discursive instrumentalization and contestation of the Habsburg past in interwar Yugoslav society and its relevance for understanding the wider post-imperial transition in Central and Eastern Europe.

When considering the contexts in which interwar Yugoslavs argued over the Habsburg past, one may notice that such references almost never appeared in a vacuum. From contemporary economic troubles to the unpleasant prospects of military service and feelings of disadvantage compared to the supposed benefactors of the new regime, the court cases demonstrate that invocations of the Habsburg Empire were usually triggered by some form of contemporary grievance and tended to perform a clear context-dependent rhetorical function. While pro-Habsburg sentiment was not a form of ethnicity or nationhood, the cases in question show that non-national forms of political loyalty can also be productively studied using an interpretative lens that approaches it from a situational perspective.

For some historians, imperial nostalgia seems to have appeared as a sign of resistance towards nationalist mobilization, i.e., as behaviour subsumable under the controversial category of “national indifference.”⁴⁹ In his study of anti-state attitudes in interwar Croatia, Filip Erdeljac found that “many peasants expressed their opposition to the interwar state in non-national ways, whether by simply directing their anger against the state or by nostalgically reminiscing about the days of Austro-Hungarian rule.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, his sources supposedly “partially affirm the findings of scholars who have presented indifference as a form of resistance to modern mass politics that persisted in spite of the resources that nationalist activists devoted to eliminating the phenomenon.”⁵¹ But just as more recent scholarship on nationalism from below seriously complicates attempts to interpret national identity as a stable and coherent form of belonging, we arguably face similarly contingent and unexpected forms of behaviour when trying to analyse contemporary exclamations of imperial (dis)loyalty.

⁴⁹ Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0037677900016715>.

⁵⁰ Erdeljac, “Between Nationalism and Indifference,” 125.

⁵¹ Erdeljac, 125.

Most of the accused featured in the present study would have likely been recognized by contemporaries as members of the titular Yugoslav nationality. Their life-stories obviously complicate simplistic teleological narratives of national liberation and loyalty derived from “objective” national belonging. As the discussed examples have shown, non-elite actors tended to combine their pro-Habsburg or revisionist sentiment with various forms of regionalism and civilisational chauvinism in rather eclectic ways. While such cases show that declarations of imperial nostalgia could prove subversive to contemporary hegemonic nationalist narratives, we should be careful to interpret non-compliance with canonical nationalism as resistance towards nationalization or even as an explicit longing for a multinational imperial world. After all, what dissatisfied people were typically missing from the past regime were not its specific national policies or lack thereof; instead, they had primarily looked back at the Habsburg age for its sense of material stability, a fact all the less surprising considering the economic and political uncertainties that had troubled Yugoslavia during its first ten years of existence.

Bibliography

Archival Sources

Okrožno sodišče Maribor (1898–1941), Pokrajinski arhiv Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia.
 Mestna občina Ptuj, 1864–1941, Zgodovinski arhiv Ptuj, Ptuj, Slovenia.
 F. 73, Okružni sud Sombor (1919–1941), Istorijski arhiv Sombor, Sombor, Serbia.

Literature

- Banac, Ivo. *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Banac, Ivo. “Was the Albanian Opposition to the Serb Kingdom’s Annexation in 1912 without Justification?” In *The Case for Kosova: Passage to Independence*, edited by Anna Di Lellio, 53–58. London: Anthem Press, 2006.
- Berecz, Ágoston. “How to Study Early Popular Engagement with Nationalism: Sources, Strategies, Research Traditions.” *Hungarian Historical Review* 12, no. 1 (2023): 3–36.
- Berecz, Ágoston. “The Hungarian Nationalities Act of 1868 in Operation (1868–1914).” *Slavic Review* 81, no. 4 (2022): 994–1015.
- Beyen, Marnix, and Maarten Van Genderachter. “General Introduction: Writing the Mass into a Mass Phenomenon.” In *Nationhood from below: Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Maarten Van Genderachter and Marnix Beyen, 3–22. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Biondich, Mark. “Stjepan Radić, Yugoslavism, and the Habsburg Monarchy.” *Austrian History Yearbook* 27 (January 1996): 109–31.

- Burger, Hannelore. *Sprachenrecht und Sprachgerechtigkeit im österreichischen Unterrichtswesen 1867-1918*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1995.
- Calic, Marie-Janine. *A History of Yugoslavia*. Translated by Dona Geyer. Central European Studies. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2019.
- Cvirn, Janez. *Das 'Festungsdreieck': zur politischen Orientierung der Deutschen in der Untersteiermark (1861-1914)*. Forschungen zur geschichtlichen Landeskunde der Steiermark, Band 76. Wien: LIT, 2016.
- Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 31 januara 1921 god. Sarajevo: Državna štamparija, 1932.
- Drakić, Gordana. "Sudska vlast i stanje u sudovima na području Vojvodine 1920-1921. godine." *Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta, Novi Sad* 43, no. 1 (2009): 189–202.
- Egry, Gábor. "Beyond Politics: National Indifference as Everyday Ethnicity." In *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe*, edited by Maarten Van Ginderachter and Jon Fox, 106–26. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Erdeljac, Filip. "Between Nationalism and Indifference: The Gradual Elimination of Indifference in Interwar Yugoslavia." In *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe*, edited by Maarten Van Ginderachter and Jon Fox, 106–26. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Gerasimov, Ilya. *Plebeian Modernity: Social Practices, Illegality, and the Urban Poor in Russia, 1906-1916*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2018.
- Ginderachter, Maarten Van. "Nationhood from Below: Some Historiographic Notes on Great Britain, France and Germany in the Long Nineteenth Century." In *Nationhood from below: Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Maarten Van Ginderachter and Marnix Beyen, 120–36. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Gnjatović, Dragana. "Evolution of Economic Thought on Monetary Reform in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after the Great War." *Balkanica*, no. 51 (2020): 183–205.
- Judson, Pieter M. *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Luthar, Oto, ed. *The Land between: A History of Slovenia*. Second, Revised edition. Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 2013.
- Mlakar, Boris. "Radical Nationalism and Fascist Elements in Political Movements in Slovenia between the World Wars." *Slovene Studies* 31, no. 1 (2009): 3–19.
- Müller, Dietmar. *Bodeneigentum und Nation: Rumänien, Jugoslawien und Polen im europäischen Vergleich: 1918-1948*. Moderne europäische Geschichte 17. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020.
- Popović Munjatović, Đorđe. *Subotica 1922*. Subotica: Knjižara 'Jedinstvo', 1922.
- Stourzh, Gerald. *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs, 1848-1918*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985.
- Wheatley, Natasha. "Central Europe as Ground Zero of the New International Order." *Slavic Review* 78, no. 4 (2019): 900–911.
- Zahra, Tara. "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis." *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0037677900016715>.