

Newman, John Paul: *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War. Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015. ISBN: 978-1-107-07076-9.

Rezensioniert von: Geoffrey Swain, Russian and East European Studies, University of Glasgow

Few would disagree with John Paul Newman's concluding comment that „the story of interwar Yugoslavia is one of political failure, fragmentation and disintegration“ (p. 262); the frailty of democracy in interwar Eastern Europe is a standard theme of any introduction to that region's history. Getting beyond that general statement, however, is more difficult. The failure of the parliamentary systems was broadly down to the First World War and its settlement, but the detail behind such a statement is both complex and country specific. In this fluent, engaging and enlightening study, Newman draws on the scholarship of the threat to democracy in interwar Western Europe to explain the failure of parliamentary democracy in Yugoslavia. The role of the Freikorps and veterans' groups like Action Française have long been seen as part of the threat to parliamentary democracy in Weimar Germany and the French Third Republic; here Newman shows how Serb and to a degree Croat veterans' associations were central to the destruction of democracy in Yugoslavia.

Newman begins his story with the military coup against the Obrenović dynasty in May 1903 and the subsequent close relationship between the new Karadjordjević dynasty and Serbia's military elite. That relationship was strengthened further during the two Balkan Wars of 1912–13 and the First World War. As a result, both the active military and the veterans' associations became the King's most loyal supporters throughout the 1920s. Through their active campaign of memorialisation, the veterans' associations created a „culture of victory“ which stressed sacrifice in a common cause, rather than the „squabbling“ of politicians; party politics was „the antithesis of all that they had fought for“ (p. 53), Newman explains. The problem for Yugoslavia, of course, was that this was essentially a narrative of Serb heroism. Despite

its disastrous defeat in October 1915 at the hands of a combined Austro-Hungarian, German and Bulgarian Army, the Serbian Army had fought well in the first year of the war and again in its latter stages when based in Salonika. It had not only played an important role in the Allied victory, but in autumn 1918 it had also been deployed to prevent the Italian Army annexing too much of the Dalmatian coast.

However, there was a darker side to the actions of the Serbian Army in founding the Yugoslav state. The Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 resulted in former prisoners of war returning home from Russia in spring 1918. Most were Croats, many were radicalised and some formed armed bands to seize and distribute the land; as the Yugoslav state was being formed in November 1918, much of the Croat countryside was in a state of armed insurrection, and so the Serbian Army was not only deployed to secure the new Yugoslav borders against Italian aggression but to „restore order“ in the Croat countryside. This bloody suppression of Croat peasants contradicted the myth of the Serbian Army forging South Slav unity and the sensitivity of this issue became clear in summer 1924 when, uniquely for the parliamentary period, a government was formed which brought together both the Serbian Democrats and the Croatian Peasant Party. This all too brief experiment in democratic reconciliation might have worked if the Croatian Peasant Party leader Stepan Radić had not publicly criticised the role of the army in 1918. With the encouragement of the King, the Minister of Army and Navy then resigned his post in protest – ever since 1903 this post had been held by a serving army officer not a politician – enabling the King to call for fresh elections; in those elections the veterans' associations played a key role in creating the climate for a Serbian Nationalist victory. So sensitive was the issue of the „pacification“ of Croatia that when it was raised by Radić again in June 1928, he was shot in the parliamentary chamber by a Serb nationalist, precipitating the crisis which led to the King ending parliamentary government in January 1929.

Between 1929 and the King's assassination in 1934, the veterans' associations were at the

height of their influence, not only domestically but within the international organisation of war veterans; when that body held its international congress in Belgrade in September 1929, the King attended and it subsequently elected a Yugoslav president. Newman not only explores the role played by veterans' associations in creating a climate favourable to the King's dictatorship, he also explores the hollow nature of the Great Serb Yugoslav ambition. In the south, Kosovo and Macedonia had to be Yugoslavised, „redeemed“ by settling Serbian colonisers among a population whose loyalty was often to Albanian or Bulgarian political groupings. The veterans were supposed to have priority in the allocation of colonised land, but political parties often disrupted this process to benefit their own supporters. It was the same in the north; the veterans' colonies established in Voivodina were soon subject to turf wars between the political parties and the veterans' associations. In Voivodina, however, there was an added nuance. Here most of the colonisers were former Volunteers, those who had chosen to join the Serbian Army during the First World War to fight for the South Slav cause, and some of whom were non-Serbs, like the blind Croat war hero Lujó Lovrić. As Newman shows, however, „the facts were that non-Serbs were seriously under-represented among Volunteers“ (p 203) and other Croats, particularly those who had served as officers in the Austro-Hungarian Army, found their attempts to commemorate their war dead repeatedly frustrated; a few were never reconciled to the Yugoslav state and went on to join the Ustaše, the pro-Axis Croat Fascist Party.

Ultimately, this „culture of victory“ could not survive the perceived degeneration of the victorious Allies towards the end of the 1930s. In the final two chapters of his study, Newman traces how the veterans' associations responded to the growth of Nazi Germany and the outbreak of the Second World War. They were soon divided into those who could accept the way Yugoslav politicians' drifted ever closer to Nazi Germany and those who could not. And it was essentially the same dilemma when Yugoslavia was invaded, would Serb nationalist Četniks resist or collaborate; that they did both only under-

lined the fact that the Serb „culture of victory“ which so dominated the interwar years was a thing of the past.

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