

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 177

“1919 – Austria-Hungary II”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

A Serbian nationalist assassination had sparked the Great War and thrown all Europe into chaos. Now that the war was ended, what would become of the nationalist ambitions of the Serbs and of their South Slav neighbors?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 177. 1919 – Austria-Hungary. Part two.

This is the second episode in the 1919 World Tour series, but we are still looking at the lands of Austria-Hungary—I should say, the lands that were within the borders of Austria-Hungary before the war. Last week, we talked about the general problems of dividing a multi-ethnic empire into ethnic nation-states and looked at the creation of Czechoslovakia. Today, I want to turn our attention to the Yugoslavs, the South Slavs, of Austria-Hungary.

It is widely believed that the Western allies created Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia at the Paris Peace Conference. This is not true, and I hope that by now listening to the podcast has disabused you of that notion. Both of these amalgamated Slavic states created themselves, and we’ve traced their steps toward independence on this podcast. By the time the Paris Peace Conference convened, both of these new nations were *faits accomplis*. The only business left for the conference to decide was where to draw these new nations’ borders. Not to say that’s a trivial matter; no, it’s far from trivial. Those boundary decisions can make the difference between a weak nation and a strong one. We saw last week how the French were keen on a strong Czechoslovakia, and the borders were drawn accordingly, to the dismay of some of its neighbors and ethnic minorities.

In the case of the new Yugoslav state, the Allies were...well...less committed to keeping *it* strong. More about that in a few minutes, but first let's get caught up on recent history in the Balkans.

You already know that the expatriate Yugoslav Committee, composed mostly of Croats and Slovenes from Austria-Hungary and the Serbian government in exile had agreed to set aside their differences regarding the postwar makeup of a South Slav state, finding it expedient to agree to the Corfu Declaration, which called for a unified state after the war, while punting the difficult questions of the internal structure of that state and the degree of ethnic autonomy it would allow to be resolved later.

That was July 1917. At about this same time, within Austria, Kaiser Karl was implementing his political thaw: releasing political prisoners, reconvening the Reichsrat, and permitting a greater degree of political dissent. And then all the unhappy Slav minorities who felt like second-class subjects in their own nations cheered and said to one another, "This new Emperor seems a fine fellow. There's no longer any reason to seek independence. Let us remain in the Habsburg Empire forever! Huzzah!" Then they all went out for ice cream.

Ha, ha. I am joking, of course. This was apparently what Kaiser Karl had expected, or at least hoped for, but in fact, as we've already seen in the case of Czechoslovakia, the new freedom simply brought anti-Habsburg nationalists out into the open. In the South Slav lands, as in Bohemia, the dissidents, which included Slav Reichsrat deputies, banded together to form a People's Council in Zagreb.

By October 1918, as Austria was in armistice negotiations with the Allies, the People's Council declared itself the voice of all Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs in the Empire and demanded an independent and unified state. On October 29, the day after Czechoslovakia declared its own independence, the People's Council declared the independence of what it called "The State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs," a nation that laid claim to the Habsburg lands of Slovenia, Croatia, Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Its interim President would be Anton Korošec, a Slovene, along with two Vice-Presidents, Ante Pavelić, a Croat, and Svetozar Pribićević, a Serb. The new state also declared its neutrality in the Great War.

Local police and military leaders began taking their orders from the People's Council, a development that Vienna took no steps to oppose. By this time, US Secretary of State Robert Lansing had already informed the Austrian foreign ministry that autonomy for the Empire's minorities would not be enough to satisfy the Allies, since those peoples were now seeking full independence. And as the People's Council declared independence, Austria itself was only days away from signing an armistice.

The government in Vienna recognized that the Allies were likely to demand the surrender of the Austrian Navy in the Adriatic, just as they had been demanding the surrender of the German Navy. Vienna also recognized that if the South Slav lands were indeed going to secede and form

their own independent state, Austria-Hungary would lose its seacoast, making a navy superfluous anyway. Nevertheless, to prevent the Austrian Navy falling into Allied hands, and Italian hands in particular, on October 31, Kaiser Karl in his capacity as commander of the Imperial Navy, ordered the transfer of all the Empire's naval vessels and facilities to the new State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. Hundreds of Austrian sailors, imprisoned after past mutinies, were released and given the choice of serving in the new navy or returning to their homes.

We've encountered the Austrian flagship, SMS *Viribus Unitis*, a couple of times before on the podcast. She was Austria's first dreadnought battleship, commissioned into the Navy in 1912. Her most notable contribution to history so far has been transporting Archduke Franz Ferdinand on his ill-fated visit to Sarajevo, and then transporting his body back to Vienna afterward. She did little during the war; the same could be said of most ships in the Austrian fleet, to be honest, but now she would be rechristened *Jugoslavija* and become the flagship of the new navy of the new State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs.

She would enjoy this new status as flagship of a new navy for less than 24 hours, which has got to be some kind of record. History has a taste for irony, and even as the Austrian flag was lowered and the new flag raised on the ship's mast, her doom was approaching, in the form of two Italian naval officers named Raffaele Rossetti and Raffaele Paolucci, who had already begun a daring raid on the Austrian naval base at Pola, not realizing as they approached that it wasn't an Austrian naval base anymore. These two Italians were what we might today call "special forces" or "naval commandos," after the Boer military formations of the Anglo-Boer War, although this terminology was not in use in 1918. The Italian military created some of the world's first special force units during the Great War. The Italians called them the *Arditi*, which roughly means "the bold ones."

Whatever you want to call them, these two Italian naval officers reached the naval base at Pola the following morning, November 1. They were discovered and taken into custody at about 4:40 AM, after which they were brought aboard *Jugoslavija* and taken before the ship's commander, the 46-year old Admiral Janko Vuković, an ethnic Croat who was previously an officer of the Austro-Hungarian Navy and now, as of last night, fleet commander of the new navy of the new nation.

The two Italian sailors told Vuković that they had attached a mine to the hull of *Jugoslavija*, timed to explode at 6:30 that morning. Vuković immediately ordered the ship evacuated and the Italian prisoners imprisoned aboard a different ship. But when 6:30 came and went with no explosion, Vuković decided that the Italians had pulled one over on him and he ordered the crew of *Jugoslavija* back on board. Tragically, the Italians had been telling the truth and it was just a matter of the detonator being a little slow. The mine exploded at 6:44 AM, and within minutes *Jugoslavija* capsized and sank, taking with it the lives of over 300 of the new navy's sailors, including its fleet commander, Janko Vuković.

Two days later, Austria-Hungary agreed to an armistice, ending the war on the Italian and Balkan fronts. You might think this would be good news for the fledgling State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, but it was not. This was not like Czechoslovakia, which was already recognized by the Allied powers by the time it declared its own independence. This nation was a bit more complicated.

[music: “Himna Kraljevine Jugoslavije” (The national anthem of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.)]

There is a saying that “the Balkans produce more history than they consume.” This saying first appeared at about this historical moment. It is frequently attributed to Winston Churchill, although in fact there is no evidence Churchill ever said it. Whoever did first say it, it is often repeated because it bears an important historical truth. Since 1870, unrest, turmoil, international disputation, political violence, and open warfare have broken out repeatedly in the Balkans. Indeed, in the English language we have incorporated the very name of this region into a verb, “to balkanize,” meaning to divide into quarreling factions. This verb also first appeared at this moment in history.

Most recently, the Great War itself began as a Balkan dispute immediately following two Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913, all of which would have been quite bad enough, even if you discounted the history of the previous half-century. And the Balkans are going to continue to make history for the rest of the century, so get used to it.

And here you have one reason why the Allies are not willing to embrace South Slav independence as warmly as they had embraced Czechoslovak independence. The Allies want a peace treaty that will actually keep the peace and they figured that meant keeping a close eye on the Balkans. The Austrians handing over their navy to the State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs made the Allies nervous. The Italians may have sunk one former Austrian dreadnought, but the new state had two more, and many smaller ships. Remember that dreadnoughts were the ultimate military machines of the time. They made any nation that possessed them an instant threat; it would be comparable to a small and unstable nation inheriting a cache of nuclear weapons in our time. This was not a development that seemed to promise peace and stability in the region. Woodrow Wilson summed up everyone’s feelings when he said, “It will be a turbulent nation, as they are a turbulent people, and they ought not to have a navy to run amuck with.”

The Italians couldn’t have agreed more. They shared the Adriatic with this new nation and its new navy, and if that navy were to be used in anger, Italy would be the most likely target. And that was just the beginning of Italy’s list of grievances. Italy claimed some of the territory the new state was also claiming; the armistice with Austria permitted Italy to send its soldiers into some of those territories. In the final hours before the armistice took effect, Italy landed soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian ports of Trieste, Pola, Rijeka, Šibenik, and Kotor and seized every ship

they could find in the harbors, including all former Austrian Navy ships. An Italian diplomat justified this action by telling the Allies, “There can be no fleet where there is no state.”

And here you have the second reason why the Allies are reluctant to recognize the new State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs: because Italy and the new state have serious overlapping territorial claims. I’m going to punt on discussing Italy and its territorial claims to a future episode, but for now I’ll just note that of the Allied leaders, Woodrow Wilson had the least patience with the Italians, which led to the United States recognizing the new Yugoslav state in February 1919. The British and the French would ultimately also break with the Italians and give it their recognition four months later, in June.

But give recognition to...what, exactly? In October 1918, while the war was still on, the Serbian prime minister Nikola Pašić was in London, where he met with our old friend Wickham Steed of the *Times* to discuss the future Yugoslav state. Steed was shocked when Pašić blithely told him that it was the Serbian Army that was liberating the South Slavs, and therefore the postwar South Slav state was going to be a Serbian one. What about the Corfu declaration? Steed asked him. Merely propaganda, Pašić told him. Steed angrily accused Pašić of behaving like the old Ottoman sultans, and that was the end of their relationship.

But in November, after the armistice was in place, the Serbian Army quickly advanced in a bid to turn the prime minister’s vision into a reality. Serbian troops occupied not only prewar Serbia, but Montenegro and parts of Bosnia and Hungary as well. In Montenegro, Serbian officials organized a quickie election for a new parliament, the Podgorica Assembly, making sure that plenty of pro-unification delegates were seated. The Podgorica Assembly dutifully voted to depose the Montenegrin King Nicola, who was living in exile in France at the time, and to approve unification with Serbia.

Now, there is little doubt that public sentiment in Montenegro in 1918 favored joining with a South Slav state, but whether that would be full unification or some kind of federation and whether or not Montenegro would get to keep its king, these were questions that never got discussed. Six weeks later, an attempted uprising by anti-union Montenegrins on Orthodox Christmas Eve was put down by Unionists and the Serbian Army.

Similarly, Serbian forces moved into Syrmia, a region of Bosnia, and the Banat, a part of Hungary, both at the invitation of local ethnic Serb councils. But apart from Syrmia, the Serbian Army refrained from entering the territory claimed by the State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. But it hardly mattered. Zagreb had plenty of other troubles. They had no army or police force to speak of, for starters. The towns were being looted and the countryside ravaged by rampaging peasants and the Italians were landing soldiers up and down the Adriatic coast.

Belgrade laid it out for Zagreb. You can agree to unification with Serbia, or, if you prefer to remain independent, the Serbian Army will take control of those regions of your state populated by ethnic Serbs and the rest of your new nation is on its own.

This second option was no option at all for the government in Zagreb. They agreed to unification, with the proviso that the final form of government for the new unified state would be determined by an elected Constituent Assembly.

And so, on December 1, 1918, the barely-a-month-old State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs was dissolved, and in its place rose the new...what are we calling it? The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Seriously? The officials in Zagreb wanted to call it Yugoslavia, but the Serbian government in Belgrade preferred this other name. It makes it sound more like the new kingdom is a successor to the old Kingdom of Serbia, and the reversal of the list of ethnic groups to put Serbs first was just the cherry on the sundae.

The two halves of this new nation coexisted uneasily. In the north, the council in Zagreb was made up mostly of Croats and Slovenes. These were lawyers and intellectuals, cosmopolitan graduates of Austria-Hungary's universities. They looked down on Serbia as a rustic nation of peasants and shepherds. They might make good soldiers, but they were not the people to lead a new nation.

The view from Belgrade was precisely the opposite. To the Serbs, the South Slav leadership in Zagreb were perfumed and pampered pets of the Habsburgs, who had lived altogether too comfortably with Imperial oppression—an oppression that fell particularly harshly upon the Empire's Serb subjects, by the way—and they had left the grueling work of fighting the war, overthrowing the Habsburgs and liberating their fellow Slavs to little Serbia.

The process of sorting out the different ethnic groups in Yugoslavia tested the limits of what was possible under the new principle of self-determination. Woodrow Wilson and other US officials went into the Paris Peace Conference with high ideals of how self-determination would replace the old and tired conventions of European diplomacy with something simple, democratic, and just. But in this corner of Europe, only recently revealed by the receding tide of the Ottoman Empire, nationalism was a new and conflicted idea. Many people in the Balkans had grown accustomed to identifying themselves by their clan or region or religion. What was the difference between a Bulgarian and a Serb, anyway? What were the Macedonians? Greeks? Or Slavs? What kind of Slav?

And in an era when ethnic identity was usually understood as related to language, what are we to make of the fact that the Serb and Croat languages are virtually identical? The only significant difference between them is that the Orthodox Serbs write their language in the Cyrillic alphabet, while the Catholic Croats write their language in the Roman alphabet. Are these two ethnic groups, or one ethnic group divided between two religions? These are quarrels that will not go away anytime soon.

And what to do about the Bosnian Muslims? One Serbian official proposed a simple solution. We give them 48 hours to convert to Orthodoxy or else die. He was perplexed when those wimps in Zagreb wouldn't go along with the plan.

In the end, the Peace Conference was generous to Yugoslavia, as it will finally be named in 1929, granting it most of the territory it claimed, at the expense of its neighbors, creating a new nation three times the size of pre-war Serbia. Once again, the French wanted strong states on Germany's flank and, in this case, Italy's flank as well.

These broadly drawn borders would leave unhappy minorities within Yugoslavia and disgruntled neighbors without. The only pre-war border that remained intact was the one with Greece, thus Greece would be the only one of Yugoslavia's neighbors to maintain a friendly relationship with it.

Within Yugoslavia, there never would be a consensus on the new nation's identity or meaning. Even though Serbs numbered not quite half the population, the King of Serbia would become the King of Yugoslavia, the Army of Serbia would become the Army of Yugoslavia, and the new nation's government officials would mostly be Serbian government officials, who would continue to work out of Belgrade, which would continue to be the nation's capital. Not exactly Greater Serbia maybe, but close enough to it to make Yugoslavia's other ethnic groups uneasy.

[music: Bartók, *Romanian Folk Dance*.]

The Kingdom of Romania also had territorial claims against Hungary, including the Banat which the Yugoslavs also claimed, and most significantly Transylvania, the region of Hungary that contained millions of ethnic Romanians. Romania had joined the Allies during the war, and the British and the French had agreed to grant Romania's claims after victory. So done deal, right? In fact, the Romanians would argue, their nation was a better friend to the Allied cause than either Serbia or Belgium had been. Those two countries had only entered the war because they had been attacked. Romania, by contrast, signed on to the cause voluntarily.

Yeah, the Allies had a slightly different view. Romania had only entered the war in 1916, at a moment when the Central Powers appeared to be collapsing. Unfortunately for the Romanians, their timing proved to be a little off. Another detail the Romanians preferred to leave unspoken was the Treaty of Bucharest, under which Romania had essentially surrendered to the Central Powers and quit the war. It had been signed in May 1918, not even a year ago, so surely you haven't forgotten already, hmm?

Yes, well, that was unfortunate, argued the Romanian prime minister, Ion Brătianu, but it hardly mattered. Romania had had no choice but to bow to the inevitable, once Russia left the war and she was surrounded. Brătianu himself had been prime minister during the war, but had resigned rather than sign that treaty. The Romanian King Ferdinand had also refused to sign the treaty. And Romania had since rejoined the war, so we're all good now, right? Only a real nitpicker would complain that Romania only rejoined the war on November 10, after three of the Central Powers had already capitulated, and Germany was only hours away from following suit.

Brătianu led the Romanian delegation in Paris, but he irritated everyone with his extensive demands and his supercilious attitude. He argued that Romania was valuable to the Allies as a bulwark against Bolshevism in Russia, and now in Hungary as well. And he, Brătianu, was the bulwark of the bulwark, as it were, Romania's last hope for an alternative to Bolshevism.

This was not an idle threat, as Bolshevik agitators were already at work in Bucharest. Strikes in the capital had led to the fall of the previous peace government and brought Brătianu back into power. If the Allies didn't give him territorial concessions he could take home to the Romanian people, he warned darkly, the Bolsheviks might triumph.

The French wanted a strong Romania, for the same reasons they wanted a strong Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. Romania had the potential to become a wealthy country. Its land was rich and fertile, and in recent years it had become an important oil-producing nation, the biggest in Europe. So it had potential, though its potential as yet remained underdeveloped.

But the prime minister was clearly the wrong person to use as the spokesperson for his nation's interests. Fortunately, Romania had a secret diplomatic weapon, in the form of its 43-year-old Queen Marie. Marie was a granddaughter of Britain's Queen Victoria on her father's side and of the Russian Emperor Alexander II on her mother's. She had married Ferdinand, then Crown Prince and heir presumptive to the Romanian throne, in 1893, when she was just 17 years old. Concerned grandmother Queen Victoria wrote at the time that the groom-to-be "is nice & the parents are charming—but the country is insecure & the immorality of the Society at Bucharest quite awful."

Well, Queen Victoria is who she is, but there was truth in her words. Romanian elites were corrupt and promiscuous, certainly by Victorian standards. Even the Romanian Orthodox Church of the time permitted believers three uncontested divorces each, which was quite liberal for the age. Marie would give birth to the couple's first child, Prince Carol, the future King Carol II, just nine months after the wedding. The marriage was a difficult one at first, until Ferdinand and Marie reached an understanding, under which she was more of a friend and advisor to the crown than a spouse, and they remained happily married on those terms.

Meanwhile, Marie would give birth to five more children, two more sons and three daughters, but in our time, the paternity of all her children, apart from Carol, is in question. She had many lovers, including a Russian Grand Duke, the Canadian millionaire Joseph Boyle, and the British MP Waldorf Astor.

Shortly after the Great War began, King Carol I died and Marie's husband took the throne. For the next two years, she was the Allies' best friend in Bucharest, continually pressing her husband for Romania to join the Allies. When it did, Marie and her daughters worked as nurses in Romanian military hospitals, which endeared them to the public, in Romania and in the Allied nations.

Queen Marie was flamboyant, outspoken, charismatic, and bold enough to treat with men as an equal. She had huge popular appeal, and her arrival in Paris for the peace talks in March 1919 was covered extensively by all the Parisian newspapers. When she was greeted by the French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, he told her bluntly, "I don't like your prime minister." Marie replied, "Perhaps you will find me more agreeable." She was a hit with Clemenceau and with Lloyd George, although her frank talk about sex offended the puritanical Woodrow Wilson.

The Supreme Council gave Romania most of its territorial claims in Hungary, except in the case of the Banat and nearby regions, which were divided between Yugoslavia and Romania. This is one of those cases where it was tricky to draw the line. The population of the region included Serbs, Romanians, and Hungarians, as well as significant numbers of Jews and Roma.

After the lines were drawn, they left 60,000 Serbs within the borders of Romania and 74,000 Romanians within the borders of Yugoslavia, and this is not to mention 400,000 Magyars in Yugoslavia and over a million of them in Romania. Romania was one of the biggest winners in the scramble to redraw European borders in 1919, at least in percentage terms. The new Romania would have double the land area and double the population of the old Romania.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you all for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Stephen for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep this operation going, and with the end-of-year holiday season coming up, allow me to remind you that donations and patronages make the perfect present, for me. It's a gift that always fits, never goes out of style, and you can be absolutely certain I won't return it. If that doesn't fit your holiday budget, might I suggest a rating and review, especially at the iTunes store? That's a gift that anyone can afford.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we wrap up our examination of post-war Austria-Hungary by examining, hey, Austria and Hungary. I should say, the new Austria and the new Hungary. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I feel I should acknowledge the fact that this story marks the extinguishment of the Kingdom of Montenegro for the rest of the twentieth century. Woodrow Wilson in particular was uncomfortable with the circumstances of Montenegro's end. The problem that faced him and Clemenceau and Lloyd George in Paris as they held court and heard the pleas of the many groups petitioning the Allies for recognition was that there was no representative in Paris who could speak on behalf of the Montenegrin people. There was the deposed King Nikola, who was in France and doing his best to press the Allies to restore his kingdom while living on French and British subsidies, but Wilson would not accept Nikola in the role. Self-determination was about the rights of peoples, not of kings.

Montenegro had always managed to maintain a separate identity, even under centuries of Ottoman rule. Under Nikola, it had won diplomatic recognition from the Great Powers and

expanded its territory. Nikola had also sired twelve children and was able to marry four of his daughters strategically to the King of Serbia, the King of Italy, and two Russian archdukes.

There was always something both romantic and faintly absurd about Montenegro. Its capital, Cetinje, was likely the smallest national capital in the world at the time, with a population in the low four figures. The grandest buildings in town besides the palace Nikola built for himself were the embassies of the Great Powers and the old royal palace, the Biljarda, literally the “billiard house,” so named because of its prize possession, an authentic billiard table, imported from England and everything. The historian Margaret MacMillian describes the Biljarda as looking like an English country inn and compares Nikola’s new palace to a German boarding house.

If you’re getting the impression of Montenegro as like something out of a comic operetta, well, you aren’t the first to have that thought. In fact, in 1905 in Vienna, there premiered *Die lustige Witwe*, or in English, *The Merry Widow*, an operetta with music by the Hungarian composer Franz Lehár. It is the story of a recently widowed woman who has inherited a great fortune that represents most of the wealth of her small country in the Balkans and a conspiracy to make sure she remarries a local man rather than a foreigner, lest her inheritance be taken abroad with her and leave the tiny nation destitute. The operetta cunningly changed the name of the small Balkan country to “Ponterverdo,” so that no one would be able to guess where their inspiration came from. *The Merry Widow* was made into motion pictures five times, including two Hollywood productions in 1934 and 1952, starring Jeanette MacDonald and Lana Turner, respectively, in the title role.

In real life, King Nikola died in 1921 at the age of 79. He never did give up his claim to the Montenegrin throne. Montenegro would remain part of Yugoslavia for the rest of the twentieth century, even after the secessions of Slovenia and Croatia and Bosnia and Macedonia and Kosovo, but would eventually end what was now merely a federal union with Serbia in 2006.

King Nikola’s great grandson, born in a German internment camp in Czechoslovakia in 1944, and educated in France, where he studied architecture, returned to independent Montenegro in 2011, where he was granted a semi-official status as a special representative of the nation with a state pension and is styled Crown Prince Nikola, or Nicholas, not exactly a king but not exactly not a king, either. As of the release date of this episode, he is 75 years old.

[music: Closing Theme]