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INTRODUCTION

Before 1918 the South Slav lands, which were to comprise Yugoslavia, did not share a common history. Divided for centuries between Ottoman and Habsburg spheres of influence, the various peoples developed their own distinct identities and particular traditions. With the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes at the end of World War I, East and West met and gave birth to a complex new multinational state.[1]

Twentieth-century Yugoslavia presents a wide spectrum of ethnic and religious diversity. Its native nationalities include Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins. Among its many minorities are to be found Hungarians, Germans, Slovaks, Rumanians, Albanians, Turks, and Jews. By religion Yugoslav citizens identify themselves as Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, and Jewish. From Austrian-like Slovenia in the northwest, populated by industrious and devout Catholics, to Turkish-style Macedonia in the southeast, inhabited by impoverished and backward Orthodox and Muslims, stretches one country composed of many different worlds.

Politically the most significant, if not the most dramatic, cultural differentiation occurs between the Serbs and the Croats. The Serbs are Eastern Orthodox Balkanites, with heroic recollections of independence and revolts against the Turks, while the Croats are Roman Catholic Central Europeans, historically linked with the West. These two nationalities share a common language, with dialectical variations, known as Serbo-Croatian (or Croato-Serbian), but they write in two different alphabets, Latin in the west and Cyrillic in the east. In addition, there exists yet another group of native Serbo-Croatian

speakers, neither Serb nor Croat, but Slavic by origin, Muslim by religion, and conservative by tradition. This Muslim ethnic group, sometimes called *Bosniak,* is concentrated in the central province of Bosnia-Hercegovina, which as a result can boast of neither a Serb-Orthodox nor a Croat-Catholic majority.

The underlying causes for such extreme heterogeneity in close geographic proximity are readily discernible. Soon after the Slavic migrations to the Balkans in the sixth century, those tribes that had settled to the west, the Slovenes and the Croats, fell under the influence of Rome, whereas those, such as the Serbs, who took up residence in the east, came under the aegis of Byzantium. The cleavage between East and West was thus established early. In the middle the inhabitants of Bosnia were torn between the two conflicting powers. Many of them eventually became Bogomils, followers of a medieval Manichaean sect, that had also gained importance in Bulgaria. Later, under Turkish rule, a high percentage of these Bogomils converted to Islam.[2] In this manner the three major religions of the area struck roots in South Slav soil.

Due to historical circumstances, no two Yugoslav regions developed in a like fashion. In the Habsburg lands the Slovenian territories became part of the Austrian crownlands at an early date; Dalmatia, after centuries of Venetian domination, came under Austrian rule in the nineteenth century; and Croatia, which had formerly been an independent kingdom, accepted union with Hungary in 1102. Also under the Hungarian Crown of St. Stephen were to be found the Banat, Bačka, and Baranja, referred to jointly as the Vojvodina. These lands to the north of the Danube had been reconquered from the Turks in the seventeenth century and were inhabited by Serbs, Hungarians, Germans, and other ethnic minorities. The final expansion of Austria-Hungary into the Balkans took place with the occupation of Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1878 and the subsequent annexation of these provinces thirty years later.

Considerable differentiation had also manifested itself within the Ottoman sphere. The Serbian Empire had reached its pinnacle in the mid-fourteenth century under the leadership of Tsar Stefan Dušan. Thereafter its power declined and Serbia, along with Macedonia and the Kingdom of Bosnia, succumbed to Turkish conquest by the end of the fifteenth century. Over the years the condition of the South Slavs under Ottoman rule deteriorated greatly. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries frequent Austrian invasions further aggravated the general situation and Serbs migrated to Habsburg territory in large numbers. Serbia was the first among the Balkan

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lands to conduct a successful revolt against the Turks in the early nineteenth century. By 1830 Serbia had gained autonomy under its own prince and in 1881 became a kingdom. The only other South Slav region to enjoy independent status before World War I was tiny Montenegro, which had never been fully subjugated to Turkish masters. Macedonia remained a part of the Ottoman Empire until the Balkan Wars of 1911–13 when it was divided among its neighbors, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia.

The First World War provided the opportunity for the amalgamation of these diverse elements. The circumstances, however, portended ominously. The spark that set off the chain of events leading to war emanated from Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, and hostilities began with the Austrian invasion of Serbia. During the course of ensuing fighting, Croatian soldiers in Habsburg uniforms faced their Serbian counterparts on opposite sides of the line of fire. With the armistice in 1918 a totally new entity, a Yugoslav state, emerged from the wreckage of a collapsed empire.

The creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes also brought together in one political unit two distinct groups of Jews, the Sephardim of the former Ottoman territories and the Ashkenazim of the erstwhile Habsburg lands. Jewish settlements in Macedonia and Dalmatia dated back as far as Greek and Roman days, and small communities existed in Slovenia and Serbia in medieval times.[3] The first major wave of Jewish immigration to the South Slav lands, however, came as a result of the expulsion of the Jews from Christian Spain in 1492.[4] The sultan welcomed the Sephardic refugees into the Ottoman Empire and they arrived in large numbers. Initially the vast majority of these newcomers settled in Salonika and Istanbul (Constantinople), but by the mid-sixteenth century, their descendants began to spread throughout the hinterland, establishing communities in such towns as Belgrade in Serbia, Sarajevo in Bosnia, and Skoplje (Üsküb) and Bitolj (Monastir) in Macedonia. Other Sephardic communities grew up in Dubrovnik (Ragusa) and Split (Spalato) on the Dalmatian coast.[5]

The Sephardim brought their own language and customs from Spain. They continued to speak Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, a dialect which evolved from fourteenth century Castilian. Wherever they took up residence, they formed separate communal organizations alongside those already in existence. Often, in larger Jewish centers, several Sephardic communities developed, created according to the

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place of origin of their membership, such as Castile, Aragon, Catalonia, and Portugal. The Sephardim considered themselves culturally superior to the native Byzantine Jews as well as to the Ashkenazim from northern and eastern Europe. Their traditions derived from their former close contact with Babylonian Jewry and the experience of the Golden Age of Jewish learning in Islamic Spain. These emigrés from Spain and Portugal soon took over undisputed leadership in Balkan Jewish life. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Ottoman Jewry flourished both economically and spiritually. With the decay of the institutions of the empire, however, the condition of the Jews within it also deteriorated so that by the nineteenth century the Balkan Sephardim represented but a pale shadow of their former glory.

Until the late nineteenth century, the Sephardic communities in Belgrade and Sarajevo displayed an extremely traditional and patriarchal character. Jewish society was very close-knit, having little contact with the outside world, and keeping its social and cultural activities confined within the limits of the Jewish quarter. The Sephardic style of living had become strongly influenced by the oriental environment. These Jews lived in one-storied houses built around large courtyards and furnished in Turkish fashion. They wore Ottoman garb, including the fez for men, and ate eastern foods. They also retained much of their Spanish heritage in their Ladino speech and Sephardic folklore. Religious piety formed an integral part of this society and traditional Jewish customs were strictly observed.

In contrast to the Sephardic communities in the Ottoman territories, the Ashkenazic communities in the Habsburg areas were all of fairly recent origin. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Jews had been banned from residence in Slovenia, Croatia, and the Military Frontier, except for Zemun (Semlin, Zimony). During the following century, a large number of Jews from various parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire migrated to the South Slav regions under Hungarian control. Major Jewish communities developed in Zagreb (Agram, Zagrab) and Osijek (Essig, Eszek) in Croatia-Slavonia and Novi Sad (Neusatz, Ujvidek) and Subotica (Szabadka) in the Vojvodina, and there were many other smaller towns with significant Jewish populations as well.

By the mid-nineteenth century a majority of the Ashkenazim had joined the Neologue (or Reform) group, which advocated greater leniency in religious practices, but a small number continued to adhere to strictly Orthodox Jewish beliefs. Such a split within the Ashkenazic ranks between the more observant, staunchly tradition-

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al minority and the more integrationist, reforming Neologues was characteristic of Hungarian Jewry as a whole.[6] As it extended into the South Slav lands, this division became particularly pronounced in the Vojvodina, but it was also found in Zagreb. For the most part, these Jews, especially the Neologues among them, no longer spoke Yiddish among themselves but used German or Hungarian instead.

After the occupation of Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1878, some Ashkenazic Jews moved to Bosnia, especially to its capital, Sarajevo. The Ashkenazic community in Belgrade also developed around the same time. Conversely, a small Sephardic settlement eventually appeared in Zagreb. On the whole, however, the line of demarcation between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim continued to follow the old border between Habsburgs and Ottomans.

Thus, the Ashkenazim, who formed two-thirds of Yugoslav Jewry in the interwar period, lived in the more westernized and urbanized northern parts of the country, and the Sephardim, comprising the remaining third, were situated mainly in the poorer areas to the south and east. In 1930 there existed in Yugoslavia 114 organized Jewish communities: 38 were Sephardic (all but 3 of which were located in Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, or Dalmatia), 70 were Ashkenazic-Neologue (with only 4 outside of Croatia and the Vojvodina), and 6 were Ashkenazic-Orthodox (all but 1 to be found in the Vojvodina).[7]

The distinction between the Sephardic, Ladino-speaking oldtimers and the Ashkenazic, Germanor Hungarian-speaking newcomers is of vital importance in understanding the Yugoslav Jewish situation in the interwar period. This dichotomy mirrored to a certain extent the conflict between Serbs and Croats, the East and the West, which has always caused considerable tension within the country. Just as the Serbs accepted the Eastern Orthodox variant of Christianity and the influence of Byzantium, and the Croats accepted Catholicism and the dominance of Rome, so the Sephardim generally adopted the Babylonian model within Judaism and the Ashkenazim the Palestinian. The Sephardic experience had evolved first in Spain and then in the Balkans, whereas the Ashkenazim developed initially in Franco-Germany and later in Eastern Europe. It is scarcely surprising that significant disparities, arising as they did out of such varied historical backgrounds, existed between the two groups, not only in religious practices but also in culture, way of life, and attitudes.[8]

By the nineteenth century, the Sephardim in the South Slav lands had accepted a somewhat oriental way of life and were still living in an almost totally Jewish milieu, interacting with their Slavic neigh-

bors only to a limited extent. The Ashkenazim, by contrast, had already begun to adopt western concepts under the Habsburgs. They had undergone a certain degree of assimilation and were no longer operating within a predominantly Jewish framework. The former were proud of their history and traditions, whereas the latter considered themselves more advanced and enlightened. Thus, the Jews, like their Yugoslav fellow-countrymen, demonstrated considerable regional variation even among themselves.

Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb were the three major cities in interwar Yugoslavia with the largest Jewish populations. Each of these centers represents a different aspect of South Slav culture; each has its own specific atmosphere. Sarajevo typifies the East, Zagreb the West, and Belgrade lies somewhere between the two extremes. Three diverse worlds—in one country. Naturally, the Jews did not react in exactly the same fashion to all of these environments. Indeed, each of the Jewish communities, whether Sephardic or Ashkenazic, was emphatically shaped by the nature of its host town.

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