

= Yugoslav coup d'état =

The Yugoslav coup d'état occurred on 27 March 1941 in Belgrade, Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The coup was planned and conducted by a group of pro-Western Serb nationalist Royal Yugoslav Air Force officers formally led by Air Force General Dušan Simović, who had been associated with a number of coup plots from 1938 onwards. For practical purposes Brigadier General of Military Aviation Borivoje Mirković, Major Živan Knežević of the Yugoslav Royal Guards, and his brother Radoje Knežević all performed leadership roles in the conduct of the coup. In addition to Radoje Knežević, some other civilian leaders were probably aware of the coup before it was launched and moved to support it once it occurred, but they were not among the organisers.

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia played no part in the coup, although it made a significant contribution to the mass street protests in many cities that signalled popular support for the coup after it occurred. The coup was successful and overthrew the three-member regency: Prince Paul, Dr. Radenko Stanković and Dr. Ivo Perović, as well as the government of Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković. Two days before the coup, the Cvetković government had signed the Vienna Protocol on the Accession of Yugoslavia to the Tripartite Pact (Axis). The coup had been planned for several months, but the signing of the Tripartite Pact spurred the organisers to carry it out, encouraged by the British Special Operations Executive.

The military conspirators brought to power the 17-year-old King Peter II Karađorđević, whom they declared to be of age to assume the throne, and a government of national unity was formed with Simović as prime minister and Vladko Maček and Slobodan Jovanović as his vice-premiers. The coup led directly to the German-led Axis invasion of Yugoslavia.

= Background =

According to economics professor and historian Jozo Tomasevich, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was politically weak from the moment of its creation and remained so during the interwar period mainly due to a "rigid system of centralism", the strong association between each national group and its dominant religion, and uneven economic development. In particular, the religious primacy of the Serbian Orthodox Church in national affairs and discrimination against Roman Catholics and Muslims compounded the dissatisfaction of the non-Serb population with the Serb-dominated ruling groups that treated non-Serbs as second-class citizens. This centralised system arose from Serbian military strength and Croat intransigence, was sustained by Croat disengagement, Serb overrepresentation, corruption and a lack of discipline within political parties. Until 1929, this state of affairs was maintained by subverting the democratic system of government. The domination of the rest of Yugoslavia by Serb ruling elites meant that the country was never consolidated in the political sense, and was therefore never able to address the social and economic challenges it faced.

Political scientist Professor Sabrina P. Ramet sees the dysfunctionality and lack of legitimacy of the regime as the reasons why the kingdom's internal politics became ethnically polarised, a phenomenon that has been referred to as the "national question" in Yugoslavia. Failures to establish the rule of law, to protect individual rights, to build tolerance and equality, and to guarantee the neutrality of the state in matters relating to religion, language and culture contributed to this illegitimacy and the resulting instability.

In 1929, democracy was abandoned and a royal dictatorship was established by King Alexander, who attempted to break down the ethnic divisions in the country through a number of means, including creating administrative divisions (Serbo-Croatian: banovine) based on rivers rather than traditional regions. There was significant opposition to this move, with Serb and Slovene opposition parties and figures advocating the division of Yugoslavia into six ethnically-based administrative units. By 1933, discontent in the largely Croat-populated Sava Banovina had developed into full-blown civil disorder, which the regime countered with a series of assassinations, attempted assassinations and arrests of key Croatian opposition figures including the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party (Serbo-Croatian: Hrvatska seljačka stranka, HSS).

Vladko Maček . When Alexander was assassinated in Marseilles in 1934 , his cousin Prince Paul headed a triumvirate regency whose other members were the senator Dr. Radenko Stanković and the governor of the Sava Banovina , Dr. Ivo Perović . The regency ruled on behalf of Alexander 's 11 @-@ year @-@ old son , Prince Peter , but the important member of the regency was Prince Paul . Although Prince Paul was more liberal than his cousin , the dictatorship continued uninterrupted . The dictatorship had allowed the country to follow a consistent foreign policy , but Yugoslavia needed peace at home in order to assure peace with its neighbours , all of whom had irredentist designs on its territory .

= = Yugoslav foreign policy during the interwar period = =

From 1921 , the country had negotiated the Little Entente with Romania and Czechoslovakia in the face of Hungarian designs on its territory , and after a decade of bilateral treaties , had formalised the arrangements in 1933 . This had been followed the following year by the Balkan Entente of Yugoslavia , Greece , Romania and Turkey , aimed at thwarting Bulgarian aspirations . Throughout this period , the Yugoslav government had sought to remain good friends with France , seeing her as a guarantor of European peace treaties . This was formalised through a treaty of friendship signed in 1927 . With these arrangements in place , Italy posed the biggest problem for Yugoslavia , funding the anti @-@ Yugoslav Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation which promoted Bulgarian irredentism . Attempts by King Alexander to negotiate with Benito Mussolini fell on deaf ears , and after Alexander 's assassination , nothing of note happened on that front until 1937 . In the aftermath of Alexander 's assassination , Yugoslavia was isolated both militarily and diplomatically , and reached out to France to assist its bilateral relationship with Italy .

= = = Cvetković ? Maček Agreement = = =

Prince Paul recognised the lack of national solidarity and political weakness of his country , and after he assumed power he made repeated attempts to negotiate a political settlement with Maček , the leader of the dominant Croat political party in Yugoslavia , the HSS . In January 1937 , Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović met with Maček at Prince Paul 's request , but Stojadinović was unwilling or unable to grapple with the issue of Croat dissatisfaction with a Yugoslavia dominated by the Serb ruling class . In 1938 , the Anschluss brought the Third Reich to the borders of Yugoslavia , and early elections were held in December . In this background , Simović had been involved in two coup plots in early 1938 driven by Serb opposition to the Concordat with the Vatican , and another coup plot following the December election . In the December 1938 elections , the United Opposition led by Maček had attracted 44 @. @ 9 per cent of the vote , but due to the electoral rules by which the government parties received 40 per cent of the seats in the National Assembly before votes were counted , the opposition vote only translated into 67 seats out of a total of 373 . On 3 February 1939 , the Minister of Education , Bogoljub Kujundžić , made a nationalist speech in the Assembly in which he stated that " Serb policies will always be the policies of this house and this government . " Head of the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (JMO) Mehmed Spaho asked Stojadinović to disavow the statement , but he did not . At the behest of the Senate leader , the Slovene Anton Korošec , that evening five ministers resigned from the government , including Korošec . The others were Spaho , another JMO politician Đafer Kulenović , the Slovene Franc Snoj , and the Serb Dragiša Cvetković .

Stojadinović sought authority from Prince Paul to form a new cabinet , however Korošec as head of the Senate advised the prince to form a new government around Cvetković . Prince Paul dismissed Stojadinović and appointed Cvetković in his place , with a direction that he reach an agreement with Maček . While these negotiations were ongoing , Italy invaded Albania . In August 1939 , the Cvetković ? Maček Agreement was concluded to create the Banovina of Croatia , which was to be a relatively autonomous political unit within Yugoslavia . Separatist Croats considered the Agreement did not go far enough , and many Serbs believed it went too far in giving power to Croats . The Cvetković @-@ led cabinet formed in the wake of the Agreement was resolutely anti @-@ Axis ,

and included five members of the HSS , with Maček as deputy Prime Minister . General Milan Nedić was Minister of the Army and Navy . After the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 , German pressure on the government resulted in the resignation in mid 1940 of the Minister of the Interior , Dr. Stanoje Mihailović , who had been organising covert anti Axis activities . In October 1940 , Simović was again approached by plotters planning a coup but he was non committal . From the outbreak of war British diplomacy focused on keeping Yugoslavia neutral , which the Ambassador Ronald Campbell apparently still believed possible .

== Pressure builds ==

By the time of the German invasion of Poland and subsequent outbreak of war in September 1939 , the Yugoslav Intelligence Service was cooperating with British intelligence agencies on a large scale across the country . This cooperation , which had existed to a lesser extent during the early 1930s , intensified after the Anschluss in 1938 . These combined intelligence operations were aimed at strengthening Yugoslavia and keeping her neutral while encouraging covert activities . In mid to late 1940 , British intelligence became aware of coup plotting , but managed to side track the plans , preferring to continue working through Prince Paul . The SOE office in Belgrade went to significant lengths to support the opposition to the anti Axis Cvetković government , which undermined the hard won balance in Yugoslav politics that government represented . SOE Belgrade was entangled with pro Serb policies and interests , and disregarded or underestimated warnings from SOE and British diplomats in Zagreb , who better understood the situation in Yugoslavia as a whole .

Yugoslavia 's situation worsened in October 1940 when Italy invaded Greece from Albania , and the initial failure of the Italians to make headway only increased Yugoslav apprehension that Germany would be forced to help Italy . In September and November 1940 respectively , Germany forced the Kingdom of Hungary and Kingdom of Romania to accede to the Tripartite Pact . In early November 1940 , General Nedić , who believed that Germany would win the war , proposed to the government that it abandon its neutral stance and join the Axis as soon as possible in the hope that Germany would protect Yugoslavia against its " greedy neighbors " . A few days later Prince Paul , having realised the impossibility of following Nedić 's advice , replaced him with the ageing and compliant General Petar Pešić . On 12 December 1940 , at the initiative of the Prime Minister of Hungary , Count Pál Teleki , Hungary concluded a friendship and non aggression treaty with Yugoslavia . Although the concept had received support from both Germany and Italy , the actual signing of the treaty did not . Germany 's planned invasion of Greece would be simplified if Yugoslavia could be neutralised . Over the next few months , Prince Paul and his ministers laboured under overwhelming diplomatic pressure , a threat of an attack by the Germans from Bulgarian territory , and the unwillingness of the British to promise practical military support . Six months prior to the coup , British policy towards the government of Yugoslavia had shifted from acceptance of Yugoslav neutrality to pressuring the country for support in the war against Germany .

On 23 January 1941 , William Donovan , a special emissary of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt , visited Belgrade and issued an ultimatum , saying that if Yugoslavia permitted German troop passage then the US would not " interfere on her behalf " at peace talks . On 14 February , Adolf Hitler met with Cvetković and his foreign minister and requested Yugoslavia 's accession to the Tripartite Pact . He pushed for the demobilisation of the Royal Yugoslav Army ? there had been a partial " reactivation " (a euphemism for mobilisation) in Macedonia and parts of Serbia , probably directed at the Italians ? and the granting of permission to transport German supplies through Yugoslavia 's territory , along with greater economic cooperation . In exchange he offered a port near the Aegean Sea and territorial security . On 17 February , Bulgaria and Turkey signed an agreement of friendship and non aggression , which effectively destroyed attempts to create a neutral Balkan bloc . Prince Paul denounced the agreement and the Bulgarians , describing their actions as " perfidy " . On 18 and 23 February , Prince Paul told US Minister Arthur Lane that Yugoslavia would not engage the German military if they entered Bulgaria . He explained that to do so would be wrongful and that it would not be understood by the Slovenes and Croats . On 1 March

, Yugoslavia was further isolated when Bulgaria signed the Pact and the German army arrived at the Bulgarian @-@ Yugoslav border .

On 4 March , Prince Paul secretly met with Hitler in Berchtesgaden and was again pressured to sign the Pact . Hitler did not request troop passage through Yugoslavia and offered the Greek city of Salonika . A time limit for Prince Paul , who was uncommitted and " wavering " , wasn 't set . Prince Paul , in the middle of a cabinet crisis , offered a nonaggression pact and a declaration of friendship , but Hitler insisted on his proposals . Prince Paul warned that " I fear that if I follow your advice and sign the Tripartite Pact I shall no longer be here in six months . " On 8 March , Franz Halder , the German Chief of the Army General Staff , expressed his expectation that the Yugoslavs would sign if German troops did not cross their border .

On 17 March , Prince Paul returned to Berchtesgaden and was told by Hitler that it was his last chance for Yugoslavia to join the Pact , renouncing this time the request for the use of Yugoslav railways in order to facilitate their accession . On 19 March , Prince Paul convened a Crown Council to discuss the terms of the Pact and whether Yugoslavia should sign it . The Council 's members were willing to agree , but only under the condition that Germany let its concessions be made public . Germany agreed and the Council approved the terms . Three cabinet ministers resigned on 20 March in protest of the impending signing of the Pact . The Germans reacted by imposing an ultimatum to accept by midnight 23 March or forfeit any further chances . Prince Paul and Cvetkovi? obliged and accepted , despite believing German promises were " worthless " . On 23 March , Germany 's guarantee of Yugoslavia 's territorial security and its promise not to use its railroads were publicized . In the United Kingdom , Alexander Cadogan , the Permanent Under @-@ Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs , penned in his diary that the " Yugoslavs seem to have sold their souls to the Devil . All these Balkan peoples are trash . "

= = = Yugoslavia signs the Pact = = =

On 25 March , the pact was signed at the Belvedere palace in Vienna . An official banquet was held which Hitler complained felt like a funeral party . German radio later announced that " the Axis Powers would not demand the right of passage of troops or war materials , " while the official document mentioned only troops and omitted mention of war materials . Likewise the pledge to give Salonika to Yugoslavia does not appear on the document . On the following day , Serb demonstrators gathered on the streets of Belgrade shouting " Better the grave than a slave , better a war than the pact " (Serbo @-@ Croatian : Bolje grob nego rob , Bolje rat nego pakt) .

= = Development of the coup = =

The coup was executed at 2 : 15 am on 27 March . It was planned by a group of Royal Yugoslav Air Force (JKRM) officers in Zemun , and Royal Guard officers in nearby Belgrade . The only senior officers involved were from the air force . Under the supervision of the JKRM deputy commander Borivoje Mirkovi? , officers assumed control of critical buildings and locations in the early hours of 27 March , including :

the Zemun air force base (Colonel Dragutin Savi?)

the bridges over the Sava between Zemun and Belgrade (Colonel Dragutin Dimi?)

the City Administration , Police Directorate and the Belgrade radio station (Colonel Stjepan Burazovi?)

the ministries and headquarters of the General Staff (Major ?ivan Kne?evi?)

the Royal Court (Colonel Stojan Zdravkovi?)

the main post office in Belgrade (Lieutenant Colonel Miodrag Lozi?)

the barracks of the Royal Guards and Automotive Command

Despite British support for the plotters , according to former British diplomat and Emeritus Professor of History , Classics and Archaeology of the University of Edinburgh David A. T. Stafford , the " [i] nitative came from the Yugoslavs , and only by a stretch of the imagination can the British be said to have planned or directed the coup d 'etat . " Ivo Tasovac has criticised Stafford 's conclusion ,

pointing to evidence that the plotters were dependent on British intelligence , and that senior British officials met with both the JKRM commander , General Dušan Simović and Mirković immediately before the coup was carried out . The British air attaché Group Captain A.H.H. McDonald met with Simović on 26 March , and the British agent T.G. Mappleback met with his close friend Mirković on the same day and ordered him to carry out the coup within 48 hours . Individuals that were probably aware of the coup included Slobodan Jovanović , president of the Serbian Cultural Club , and Ilija Trifunović @-@ Birčanin , president of Narodna Odbrana (National Defence) .

There are contradictory claims as to who was the leader of the coup and had managed its execution , coming from Simović , Mirković , and Major Ivan Knežević . Mirković claimed sole credit immediately after the coup and stated on its tenth anniversary that : " Only after I had informed General [Simović] about my idea and he had accepted it did I make the decision to undertake the planned revolt . I made the decision myself , and I also carried out the whole organization . I made the decision as to when the revolt would take place . " It is likely that he had been planning a coup since 1937 when an Italo @-@ Yugoslav pact was signed . King Peter later credited simply the " younger and middle ranks [of officers] of the Yugoslav army " for the coup in a speech on 17 December 1941 . Simović 's response was published posthumously , he claimed that he " stood in the center of the whole undertaking " and " personally engaged his assistant Brigadier General Bora Mirković for the action " . Tomasevich considers Mirković 's account to be the most credible of the two , and points out it is corroborated from several sources , both Allied and Axis . The matter would play a role in the factionalism that would divide the soon @-@ to @-@ be Yugoslav government @-@ in @-@ exile during the war .

At the time of the coup , Prince Paul was in Zagreb en route to a planned holiday in Brdo . On the morning of 27 March , Deputy Prime Minister Maček was informed of the coup and met Prince Paul at Zagreb 's railway station to discuss the situation . Maček suggested that Paul stay in Zagreb , with the possibility of mobilizing army units in the Banovina of Croatia in his support . Prince Paul declined this offer , at least partially because his wife Princess Olga and children remained in Belgrade . He reached the capital by train that evening and was immediately ordered to sign papers abolishing the regency . He was subsequently exiled to Greece .

On the morning of 27 March , the royal palace was surrounded and the coup 's advocates issued a radio message that impersonated the voice of Peter with a " proclamation to the people " , calling on them to support the new king . Pamphlets with the proclamation of the coup were subsequently dropped into cities from aircraft . Demonstrations followed in Belgrade and other large Serbian cities that continued for the next few days . Demonstrators frequently used the slogan that was used by demonstrators the day before the coup , " Better the war than the pact , better the grave than a slave " . Winston Churchill , Prime Minister of the United Kingdom , commented that " Yugoslavia has found its soul ? .

For other nations in Yugoslavia , the prospect of war and the government 's close ties to the Serbian Orthodox Church was not at all appealing . Archbishop Aloysius Stepinac , president of the Roman Catholic Conference of Bishops of Yugoslavia , bitterly wrote in his diary that , " All in all , Croats and Serbs are of two worlds ... that will never move closer to one another without an act of God " . He also wrote , " The Schism [Orthodoxy] is the greatest curse in Europe , almost greater than Protestantism . There is no morality , no principle , there is no truth , no justice , no honesty [in Orthodoxy] . " On the same day , he publicly called on the Catholic clergy to pray for King Peter and that Croatia and Yugoslavia would be spared a war .

= = Aftermath = =

= = = The new government = = =

In the wake of the coup , Simović 's new government refused to ratify Yugoslavia 's signing of the Tripartite Pact , but did not openly rule it out . Hitler , angered by the coup and anti @-@ German incidents in Belgrade , gathered his senior officers and ordered that Yugoslavia be crushed without

delay . On the same day as the coup he issued Führer Directive 25 which called for Yugoslavia to be treated as a hostile state . Italy was to be included in the operations and the directive made specific mention that " [e] fforts will be made to induce Hungary and Bulgaria to take part in operations by offering them the prospect of regaining Banat and Macedonia " . Furthermore , the directive stated that " [i] nternal tensions in Yugoslavia will be encouraged by giving political assurances to the Croats " .

On 30 March , Foreign Minister Momčilo Ninović summoned the German ambassador Viktor von Heeren and handed him a statement which declared that the new government would accept all its international obligations , including accession to the Tripartite Pact , as long as the national interests of the country were protected . Von Heeren returned to his office to discover a message from Berlin instructing that contact with Yugoslav officials was to be avoided , and he was recalled to Berlin . No reply was given to Ninović . On 2 April orders were issued for the evacuation of the German embassy , and the German chargé d'affaires advised the diplomats of friendly countries to leave the country .

On 3 April , Führer Directive 26 was issued , detailing the plan of attack and command structure for the invasion . Hungary and Bulgaria were promised the Banat and Yugoslav Macedonia respectively and the Romanian army was asked not to take part , holding its position at the countries ' border . Internal conflict in Hungary over the invasion plans between the army and Teleki led to the Prime Minister 's suicide that same evening . Also on 3 April , Edmund Veessenmayer , representing the Dienststelle Ribbentrop , arrived in Zagreb in preparation for a regime change . Croatian pilot Vladimir Kren , a captain in the Royal Yugoslav Air Force , defected to the Germans on 3 April taking with him valuable information about the country 's air defenses .

Simović named Maček as Deputy Prime Minister once again in the new government , but Maček was reluctant and remained in Zagreb while he decided what to do . While he considered the coup had been an entirely Serbian initiative aimed at both Prince Paul and the Cvetković - Maček Agreement , he decided that he needed to show HSS support for the new government and that joining it was necessary . On 4 April he travelled to Belgrade and accepted the post , on several conditions ; that the new government respect the Cvetković - Maček Agreement and expand the autonomy of the Banovina Croatia in some respects , that the new government respect the country 's accession to the Tripartite Pact , and that one Serb and one Croat temporarily assume the role of regents . That same day exiled Croatian politician and Ustaše leader Ante Pavelić called for Croats to start an uprising against the government over his Radio Velebit program based in Italy .

On 5 April the new cabinet met for the first time . While the first two conditions set by Maček were met , the appointment of regents was impracticable given Prince Peter had been declared to be of age . Involving representatives from across the political spectrum , Simović 's cabinet was " extremely disunited and weak " . It included members who fell into three groups ; those who were strongly opposed to the Axis and prepared to face war with Germany , those who advocated peace with Germany , and those that were uncommitted . These groups were as follows :

= = = Axis invasion = = =

The Axis invasion of Yugoslavia began on 6 April . The bombing of Belgrade forced the government to seek shelter outside the city . From here , King Peter and General Simović planned to leave for exile . Maček , refusing to leave the country , resigned on 7 April and designated Juraj Krnjević as his successor . Maček returned to Zagreb . Three other ministers also refused to leave Yugoslavia : Ivan Andres and Bariša Smoljan of the HSS and Kulenović of the JMO . The government met on Yugoslav soil for the last time on 13 April near Pale . From here they travelled to Nikšić where they were flown out of the country to Athens .

Another result of the coup was that the work that had been done by British intelligence with the anti - Axis government of Cvetković and Maček was lost . By supporting the coup plotters , the SOE undermined the balance in Yugoslav politics that had been achieved by the Cvetković - Maček Agreement . Serb nationalists supported and welcomed the coup because it ended Croatian autonomy under the Agreement and freed them to pursue a Greater Serbia agenda . The coup and

its immediate aftermath also contributed to the paralysis within the Yugoslav government @-@ in @-@ exile during the rest of the war , due to ongoing disputes regarding the legitimacy of the Cvetkovi? ? Ma?ek Agreement .

= = = Legacy = = =

Prince Paul was found guilty of war crimes in September 1945 for his role in the Yugoslav accession to the Tripartite Pact . In 2011 , a High Court in Serbia found the sentence to be politically and ideologically motivated and Prince Paul was officially rehabilitated . A similar decision had been made in 2009 to rehabilitate Cvetkovi? for war crimes charges relating to the signing of the pact .

= = = Books = = =

= = = Journals = = =

= = = Websites = = =