

DEATH OF A KINGDOM: MONTENEGRO AND YUFOGLAVIA IN WWI

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Abstract: The role of Montenegro in the First World War was particularly interesting for the Yugoslav question. The Balkan country, which had long been the center of Slav irredentism, became in fact during the conflict the object of Belgrade's expansionist ambitions.

The Montenegrin identity ended in large part to blend in with the broader Yugoslav project although some groups remained loyal to King Nikola Petrović-Njegoš and to the idea of an independent Montenegro. While France was in favor of Belgrade, Italy still tried to support Nikola, as far as the real situation on the ground made it difficult to provide real support to the realists.

The question was actually connected to the rivalry for controlling the Adriatic Sea. In the last months of WWI Montenegro had little chance to maintain its independence, an evidence reinforced by the presence of Serbian troops in all key areas of the country. Notwithstanding, in early 1919 the Italians were still trying to use the Montenegrin issue to embarrass Belgrade.

While King Nikola was still in exile in Paris, anti-Serbian groups were organizing in Cetinje, staging royalist demonstrations eventually repressed by force by the Yugoslav Army. The clashes that took place in Montenegro in this period, albeit limited, demonstrated the existence of a Montenegrin national identity in front of the new Yugoslav project, providing as well an interesting insight into the plans and ambitions of the Great Powers.

Keywords: Montenegro, National Identity, First World War, Yugoslavia, Italy

Towards War: The July Crisis

In Nineteenth century, the Petrović Njegoš family succeeded in transforming Montenegro into a secular principality that in 1878, with the Treaty of Berlin, was internationally recognized as an

independent state, becoming the centre of Slavic struggle against the Ottoman Empire. Under Nikola I Montenegro was also granted its first constitution in 1905 and was elevated to the rank of kingdom in 1910. In the Balkan Wars, of which Montenegro was one of the instigators, the country did make important territorial gains by splitting the Sanjak of Novi Pazar with Serbia, although the city of Shkodra, captured by Montenegrin forces, had to be given up to the new established Albania at the insistence of the Powers.

The events of the summer of 1914, with the emergence of the Austro-Serbian crisis, prompted European diplomacy to face the problem of the future of Montenegro as well. The issue was also discussed by the Italian Foreign Minister, Antonino di San Giuliano, and the German Ambassador to Rome, Johannes von Flotow, on 8 July. In reaction to a possible union of Serbia and Montenegro, Flotow envisaged an Austrian attack on Mount Lovćen, to which San Giuliano objected, believing such an action unlikely as long as King Nikola of Montenegro was still alive. Indeed, only the complex events of the looming conflict were to offer the conditions for the union of the two Slavic states.¹ In the following hours, the Italian Foreign Minister informed the governments of Cetinje, Belgrade and Petersburg of the risk of an Austro-Hungarian attack on Lovćen, showing itself willing to discuss the union of Serbia and Montenegro, obviously linking it to possible compensations for Italy in unredeemed lands.² In fact, as San Giuliano knew, Nikola had no intention of ending up in the deadly embrace of the Serbs and when the king, especially in the past, had thought of a union, he had always conceived it under his leadership, not certainly that of the Karađorđević.

The deterioration of the diplomatic situation over the course of July 1914 made in any case secondary the Serbian-Montenegrin issue, revealing rather clearly the impending European conflict. The Cetinje government for its part, while pandering to the sentiments of the population, was careful in demonstrating its distance from any action of Serbian nationalism

¹ On the issue of a Serbian-Montenegrin union before the Great War, see D.D. Vujović, *Ujedinjenje Crna Gore i Srbije*, Istoriski Institut Narodne Republike Crne Gore, Titograd 1962; H. Heilbronner, The Merger Attempts of Serbia and Montenegro, *Journal of Central European Affairs*, XVIII/3, 1958, pp. 281-291.

² Documenti Diplomatici Italiani (DDI), Quarta Serie, vol. XII, doc. 124. See F. Caccamo, *Il Montenegro negli anni della prima guerra mondiale*, Aracne, Ariccia 2008, pp. 17-21.

against Austria-Hungary, showing even willing to take a line in favor of Vienna in exchange for clear concessions to the security and independence of Montenegro and his dynasty.³

Meanwhile many in Rome followed with concern the developments in Montenegrin politics, especially since both hypotheses on the future of the country, union with Serbia or alignment to Austria-Hungary, would represent a threat to Italians interests in the Balkans. Austrian action on Lovćen or its possible voluntary transfer, were in fact an issue for Italian diplomacy.⁴ For this reason, it is not surprising that San Giuliano counseled the Montenegrins to stay out of the whole matter, defending their neutrality so as not to provide a pretext for an Austrian military operation on Lovćen, and above all, warning Cetinje not to undertake any adventure in northern Albania.⁵

The Montenegrin public opinion was, however, absolutely pro-Serb and the crisis between Vienna and Belgrade could not leave unaffected the Cetinje government. On the other hand, Italian pressure on Austrian allies to avert the attack on Lovćen seemed for the moment to work.⁶ But there was the fear that in one way or another Mount Lovćen were occupied by the Austrians, without Italy could get anything in return, an eventuality fraught with dangerous consequences, especially for the negative impact it would have on Italian public opinion.⁷

Relations between Vienna and Cetinje worsened significantly since July 26, making it possible for King Nikola to reopen the talks with Belgrade in anti-Austrian function.⁸ With the outbreak of the conflict, several pro-Serb demonstrations took place in Montenegro, and the government ordered mobilization. Then, fearing the Serbian expansionism on the Adriatic, the Italian diplomacy tried to convince Montenegro to remain neutral, also looking to involve in this action the other powers.⁹ In fact there were not at this stage, however, many chances to influence the

³ Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., p. 22; N. Rakočević, Les relations entre le Monténégro et l’Autriche-Hongrie, in J.R. Bojović (éd.), *Le Monténégro dans les relations internationales*, Institut d’Histoire de la R.S. de Monténégro, Titograd 1984, pp. 55-71.

⁴ DDI, Quarta Serie, vol. XII, doc. 274, 401.

⁵ Ivi, docs. 419, 439. More generally, on the relations between Italy and Montenegro in this period see A. Biagini, I negoziati tra l’Italia e il Montenegro durante la prima guerra mondiale (1914-1918), *Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento*, 1981/4, pp. 443-458.

⁶ Ivi, docs. 384, 507, 532.

⁷ Ivi, docs. 565, 575.

⁸ Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 24-25. See also Treadway J.D., *The Falcon and the Eagle. Montenegro and Austria-Hungary 1908-1914*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 1983.

⁹ DDI, Quarta Serie, vol. XII, doc. 609, 686.

conduct of Montenegro.¹⁰ The issue went on in the following days, representing a non-secondary element of Italy's diplomatic position. As a matter of fact, Montenegro and Lovćen in particular, served to reiterate the never forgotten criterion of compensation in the Balkans to which Italian diplomacy continued to remain faithful.¹¹

Montenegro at War

On 28 July 1914, the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Serbia made it necessary to find a concrete strategy to ensure the defense of the interests of Montenegro and perhaps its very survival. Due to Montenegrin public opinion, although Vienna had tried to maintain Montenegrin neutrality, promising the transfer of Shkodra and parts of the Sanjak of Novi Pazar, King Nikola could not avoid siding with Serbia, declaring war on Austria-Hungary on 6 August.¹² This small Balkan country could not pass undamaged through a large conflict, despite the dedication and capabilities of its aggressive, albeit poorly armed, army. Isolated by the blockade immediately imposed by the Austro-Hungarian fleet and dramatically short of everything, especially money, the country then addressed Entente for support, and in order to coordinate the action of the two Slavic allies, the Serbian general Bozidar Janković assumed command of their forces. The Montenegrins thus accepted, on Russian insistence, the arrival of some Serbian officers who assumed the control of the General Staff. Montenegrin forces were allegedly to concentrate towards Bosnia, focusing on Sarajevo and renouncing to actions towards coastal areas.¹³ However, since the beginning disagreements emerged between Serbs and Montenegrins in the conduct of the operations, Cetinje especially disliked the obvious attempt by Serbia to unite and actually control the two armies, eliminating any autonomy. This explains well the reason of the mutual and reiterated criticism, and the will of King Nikola and his government not to engage in Bosnia and focus instead on their traditional Adriatic goals.¹⁴ Montenegro, however, could not expect much support from the Entente, as evidenced by the behavior of the small French military

¹⁰ Ivi, doc. 652. San Giuliano insisted on the serious consequences for the Italian public opinion of a conflict between Vienna and Cetinje, as well as any solution of the question of Lovćen. Ivi, docs. 686, 790.

¹¹ See Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 27-30.

¹² Documents Diplomatique Français (DDF), 1914, Tome I, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris 1997, doc. 513.

¹³ A. Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War, 1914-1918*, Hurst, London 2007, pp. 138-141.

¹⁴ DDF, 1914 Tome I, docs. 315, 323, 412. Quoted also in Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., p. 33.

mission, which adopted Serbia's strategy, by refusing for example to support Montenegrin plans, indeed quite ambitious, for an attack on Kotor.¹⁵

The Austro-Hungarians had meanwhile deployed a new Corps against Montenegro, whose main task was to prevent the connection between the enemy armies. These troops, however, were halted, while from the top of Mount Lovćen Montenegrins even managed to bomb Kotor. Austrian troops were able to occupy only Pljevlja while in turn the Montenegrins occupied small portions of enemy territory, then succeeding in taking Pljevlja after the Battle of Cer. In this period, San Giuliano continued to be interested in Montenegro, considering that Italy could gain both in the case of an Austro-Hungarian victory, on the basis of the principle of compensation, either by siding alongside the Entente, in the case of an Austrian collapse. Nevertheless, the Italians did not want the Montenegrins seizing Shkodra, and Rome officially warned the Cetinje government that such an action would not be tolerated.¹⁶ At the end of 1914 the withdrawal of the international contingent from Shkodra, where it had been deployed after the Balkan Wars, created many concerns in Italy, where it was feared that the Montenegrins, encouraged by the Entente, could occupy the city. This risk increased with the final collapse of the short-lived authority of William of Wied in Albania. Thus, while the Italians were thinking of a landing in Vlorë, King Nikola was working to create the conditions for an action in the area of Shkodra and Shëngjin.¹⁷

The actual occupation of Vlorë created a state of agitation by fomenting the expansionist ambitions of the Balkan countries, so that the Entente governments decided to send a note to Athens, Cetinje and Niš to request a formal commitment not to engage in further occupations of Albanian territory.¹⁸

In the negotiations between Italy and the Entente, the interests of Cetinje did not find much space, and the future of Montenegro was generally subordinated, especially by Russian Foreign

¹⁵ Archives du Ministère des affaires étrangères (AMAE), Guerre Mondiale, 322, Ambassade de Russie à Delcassé, note du 23 Septembre, 1914; 323, Delaroche-Vernet à Delcassé, Cetinje 27 janvier 1915.

¹⁶ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. I, doc. 144. Montenegrins, however, were not willing to give up Shkodra, *ivi*, doc. 331.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, docs. 756, 768, 856. See also Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, *cit.*, pp. 39-46. The French government opposed to any Montenegrin action in northern Albania for not jeopardizing the relations with Rome. DDF, 1914, doc. 464.

¹⁸ DDF, 1915, Tome I, doc. 80. On the relations between Italy and Montenegro with respect to the Albanian question see D.R. Živojnović, *Italia i Crna Gora 1914-1925. Studija o izneverenom savezništvu*, Službeni List SPJ, Sarajevo 1989, pp. 49-74.

Minister Sazonov, to the defense of Serbian war aims. As a matter of fact, San Giuliano's proposals made no reference to Montenegro in case of a partition of Albania.¹⁹ This is not the case to repeat the stages leading up to the Treaty of London, on which so much has been written over the years. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that when Sonnino replaced di San Giuliano, eventually Montenegro found space in diplomatic negotiations between the Powers.

The Italian declaration of war on Austria-Hungary was greeted enthusiastically in Montenegro, where the majority of the population believed that this represented the end of the blockade imposed by the enemy.²⁰ But there was also the fear, particularly among the Serbs, that the Italians could jeopardize Serbia's interests in the region.²¹ In fact, the Serbs immediately began to put pressure on Montenegrins, making clear that any collaboration between Italy and Montenegro would have to receive prior approval from the Serbian Government.²² The real obstacle to cooperation between the two countries, however, was because of the Albanian question, not having Montenegrins given up their ambitions on Shkodra, which Cetinje wanted to accomplish as soon as possible.²³ This added to Serbian operations in central Albania, that the Serbian HQ was preparing to launch between May and June 1915, apparently to prevent Italy from blocking Serbia's expansionism in this region. The Serbs, acting in Albania renounced to offensive operations on the Bosnian front, creating a state of evident malaise in relations with Rome, and endangering the agreements reached between the Allies.²⁴ Meanwhile, there was growing tension between Albanians and Montenegrins, and the Cetinje government thought to follow Serbia's example.²⁵ Not unexpectedly, among those who opposed Montenegrin action in Albania there was the Serbian Prime Minister, Nikola Pašić, who intended to counter any autonomous and expansionist Montenegrin policy, thereby fueling the doubts of the King and the

¹⁹ Ivi, doc. 201. For the role of Montenegro in the discussions leading up to the Treaty of London cfr. Živojnović, *Italia i Crna Gora*, cit., pp. 77-96.

²⁰ The block represented the main problem for the Montenegrin government. DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. IV, doc. 19. DDF, 1915, Tome II, doc. 3

²¹ DDF, 1915, Tome II, doc. 3. Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 66-67.

²² AMAE, Guerre Mondiale, 322, Delaroche-Vernet à Delcassé, Cetinje, 5 giugno 1915.

²³ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. III, docs. 716, 733.

²⁴ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. IV, doc. 188; DDF, 1915, Tome I, doc. doc. 572.; cfr. anche Sonnino, *Diario*, cit., vol. II, p. 162.

²⁵ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. IV, doc. 19; DDF, 1915, Tome II, doc. 1.

Montenegrin government towards Serbia.²⁶ However, on 11 June 1915, Montenegrin troops entered Albanian territory, eventually reaching Mount Taraboš, near Shkodra.²⁷

Despite a British attempt to send Cetinje a joint statement against the occupation of Shkodra, Montenegrin troops continued to threaten the city, occupying Lezhë and Shëngjin as well. On 23 June, the Allied governments officially asked the Montenegrins not to make further operations without informing the Serbian HQ.²⁸ Notwithstanding, on 27 June Shkodra fell to the Montenegrins.²⁹ Only then it was actually delivered the Allied note, which however did not produce any result. What was sure were Italian disappointment and the fear, nurtured in some circles, that Montenegro was now thinking to align to Austria-Hungary.³⁰

In the following weeks, France and Russia continued to have an ambiguous attitude towards Montenegro, while Italy and Great Britain did not spare criticism. The occupation of Shkodra also led to the waiver by the Italians to supply Montenegro, although Rome continued to defend the principle of Montenegrin independence in the face of Serbian claims.³¹

Meanwhile, Montenegrin forces limited themselves to maintain their positions, without risking their scarce resources, thereby fueling the rumors about an upcoming surrender or even a desertion to the enemy.³² In support of Serbs and Montenegrins, the Entente decided to send supplies across the Adriatic.³³ This solution also ensured Serbia's interests in Montenegro, because it was established that the Italians would not have given access to Montenegrin ports.³⁴

The new Austro-Hungarian offensive in the fall of 1915 and Bulgaria's declaration of war marked the fate of Serbia, whose forces, to prevent the encirclement were forced to a general retreat toward the sea, through Montenegro and Albania. Amidst great difficulties about 125,000

²⁶ Ivi, docs. 141, 163, 175. In this regard, it is particularly interesting the outburst of Nicola with his son in law Vittorio Emanuele III, by these reported to Sonnino on June 11. Ivi, doc. 153.

²⁷ Ivi, doc. 184; DDF, 1915, Tome II, docs. 105, 130. Cfr. anche Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 72-73.

²⁸ DDF, 1915, Tome II, doc. 151.

²⁹ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. IV, doc. 290.

³⁰ Ivi, docs. 300, 305; DDF, 1915, Tome II, doc. 188. AMAE, *Guerre Mondiale*, 323, Bertie à Delcassé, Parigi 17 luglio 1915. For the consequences of the occupation of Shkodra see Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 75-84.

³¹ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. IV, doc. 230; Sonnino, *Diario*, cit., vol. II, pp. 162-163. On Italian support to Montenegrin independence see DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. IV, docs. 442, 453, 475.

³² See Živojnović, *Italia i Crna Gora*, cit., pp. 165-192. As for the rumors on the Cetinje government's intentions, DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. V, doc. 11.

³³ DDF, 1915, Tome III, docs. 387, 573; Sonnino, *Carteggio*, cit., vol. II, doc. 440, 456.

³⁴ AMAE, *Guerre Mondiale*, 323, Delaroché-Vernet à Briand, Cetinje 22 novembre e 4 dicembre 1915.

Serbs finally reached the Adriatic coast being boarded on Italian ships and transferred to Corfu.³⁵ The Montenegrin Army gave its support to cover the Serbian retreat; nevertheless, unpleasant episodes were recorded, such as looting.³⁶ In addition, the situation created by the arrival of the Serbs only served to further fuel the doubts against the conduct of the Montenegrin government.³⁷ The transfer of Serbs in the island of Corfu also led to a new unknown factor on the future of Montenegro. In the parliamentary session of 25 December 1915, there were many who pronounced themselves in favor of a separate peace; this caused the resignation of the Prime Minister, General Vukotić, replaced by Lazar Mijušković. Montenegro, probably waiting to figure out Austro-Hungarian's plan, however, continued to declare loyal to the allies, even if Cetinje was unable to completely dispel the doubts about its real intentions. While the Entente was discussing the possibility of providing adequate assistance to the Balkan country, on 7 January 1916, the Austrian attack on Lovćen began.³⁸ The next day the enemy conquered the crest of Bobotov Kuk, approaching the conquest of Mount Lovćen, while also in areas where the Montenegrins had fought successfully, as in the Battle of Mojkovac, the defenders began to show signs of weakness deeming a defeat imminent. The moral collapse of Montenegro was now therefore clear.³⁹

It was at this point, while the last Serbian troops were embarking to Corfu, that King Nikola announced to the representatives of the Entente his intention to move to Podgorica. The following day the Prime Minister made known the decision to call for a truce. The harsh conditions required by the Austro-Hungarians, however, made it impossible for their acceptance by the sovereign, although Mijušković was in favor of pursuing the negotiations.⁴⁰

The result of the discussions within the Montenegrin leadership was the telegram of 13 January, by which the King asked directly to Francis Joseph "an honorable and dignified peace".⁴¹ A

³⁵ Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War*, cit., pp. 151-161.

³⁶ Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 89-90.

³⁷ AMAE, Guerre Mondiale, 323, Delaroché-Vernet à Briand, Cetinje 20, 25, 26 dicembre 1915; DDF, 1915, Tome III, doc. 608;

³⁸ On the possible aid to Montenegro and specifically on the possible Italian contribution see DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. V, doc. 275.

³⁹ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. V, doc. 179. See also Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 93-94.

⁴⁰ In fact, on the same line as the head of the government there was also Prince Mirko, the second son of Nikola. DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. V, doc. 308.

⁴¹ Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 97-98.

gesture that nonetheless proved useless given the determination of the Austro-Hungarians to obtain a total victory. This led to the decision to transfer the Court and Government to Shkodra and then, on 17 January a request for assistance to the Italian Navy for the evacuation of the government and the royal family.⁴² Nevertheless, for a few days Mijušković seemed willing to reach an understanding with the Austro-Hungarians. Only 20 January 1916 Nikola definitively rejected Vienna's requests, agreeing to evacuate at least part of the government.⁴³ Fled the country, Nicola went into exile in France where he remained for the duration of the war.

The French Exile of King Nikola

In France, Mijušković undertook the difficult task of reorganizing a government recognizable as rightful by the Entente, not to permanently undermine the already difficult position of Montenegro. Rebuild the credibility of the government, however, did not prove easy. The doubts and rumors in the previous months and the steady Serbian propaganda in fact already started to marginalize King Nikola and his representatives, thus crediting the Yugoslavist ideal.⁴⁴ The attempt to organize and deploy to the front a Montenegrin voluntary force failed as well.⁴⁵ The government in exile was in fact now isolated and despite the ups and downs of the war, this fact was not to change.

At the end of April 1916 King Nikola tried to shake up relations with the Allies, replacing Mijušković with Andrija Radović; a decision no doubt influenced by the pressures of the Russian and French diplomacies, interested in the revival of Serbian-Montenegrin relations.⁴⁶ The appointment of Radović was also welcomed in Rome, where the new Prime Minister had held the position of Montenegrin representative.⁴⁷ It is important to note that Italy, while continuing to have doubts about the reliability of the Montenegrin government, were the only power really interested in defending the independence of the country, and not coincidentally, Rome was also

⁴² DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. V, doc. 338.

⁴³ Actually in Montenegro remained Prince Mirko and some ministers; the decision, however, caused many suspicions about the real intentions of Nicola. As for the military evacuated, these were nearly 1,700.

⁴⁴ Živojnović, *Italia i Crna Gora*, cit., pp. 193-269; Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 101-144.

⁴⁵ The failure to form a Montenegrin force will prove a serious handicap for the future of the country, see Živojnović, *Italia i Crna Gora*, cit., p. 249.

⁴⁶ However, there were no formal requests to that effect. AMAE, Guerre Mondiale, 325, Briand à Delaroché-Vernet, Paris 5, 6 maggio 1916; DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. V, doc. 808.

⁴⁷ Ivi, doc. 849.

ready to support the attempt to organize armed resistance to the occupiers;⁴⁸ an interest, however, received with great concern by the Serbs and their French supporters.⁴⁹ Moreover, aware of the risks for Italy's Balkan ambitions due to Serbia's intention to annex Montenegro, Sonnino tried to avoid taking too rigid a line.⁵⁰

The Montenegrin situation became increasingly difficult, and in August came news of a plan prepared by Radović, without informing the king, for union with Serbia on the basis of a dynastic alternation formula.⁵¹ Thus Sonnino ordered the Italian ambassadors in the allied capitals to officially ask the governments with which they were accredited, what were their intentions in respect of Montenegro.⁵² The answers were not encouraging, however, for France and Russia clearly sided with the Serbs and the British believed the Balkan country actually unable to sustain itself.⁵³

In the second half of 1916, the Montenegrin government moved from his temporary seat of Bordeaux to Neuilly and it was here, in the following autumn, that erupted the crisis between the pro-independence faction and the Unionists; a crisis however, ably managed by King Nikola with the resignation of Radović and the formation of a new government headed by Milo Matanović.⁵⁴ The event also reminded the Italian diplomacy that the danger of absorption of Montenegro into a Greater Serbia was still relevant, also because Pašić was determined to use the opportunity offered by the war to stop King Nikola to return home.⁵⁵ The king was in fact an obstacle to unionist plans and not surprisingly, in the same period circulated rumors about plots to eliminate the Montenegrin dynasty.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Ivi, docs. 153, 178. An attempt however, that will end up with the rapid failure of the insurgents. See Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War*, cit., pp. 245-246 e 265-267.

⁴⁹ AMAE, Guerre Mondiale, 326, Delaroche-Vernet à Briand, Bordeaux 13 e 24 giugno 1916; Briand à Cambon, Paris 17 giugno 1916.

⁵⁰ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. V, docs. 62, 176.

⁵¹ Ivi, docs. 248, 323.

⁵² Ivi, docs. 387, 399.

⁵³ It should be remembered that Boris Stürmer, Sazonov's successor as Foreign Minister, was more inclined to grant some of these chances to Montenegro. Ivi, docs. 294, 420.

⁵⁴ Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., pp. 135-136.

⁵⁵ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. VII, docs. 110, 122. AMAE, Guerre Mondiale, 329, Delaroche-Vernet à Briand, Neuilly 12 e 20 gennaio 1917.

⁵⁶ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. VII, doc. 700. AMAE, Guerre Mondiale, 330, Boppe à Briand, Corfou 13 maggio 1917. Cfr. anche Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War*, cit., p. 283; Caccamo, *Il Montenegro*, cit., p. 137.

However, crushed by the weight of the unionist issue, Matanović did not remain Prime Minister for long, being soon replaced by Evgenje Popović. Meanwhile, the episode of the proclamation of Gjirokastra and the prospect of an Italian support for the independence of Albania caused a crisis in relations with Rome.⁵⁷

The Yugoslavist Movement

At this point it seems necessary to mention briefly the role played by the Serbs. On the definition of their postwar plans it had undoubtedly an important place the US declaration of war and the willingness expressed by Wilson for the Yugoslav idea.⁵⁸ This fact contributed to urge the Serbian government to open serious discussions with Croatian and Slovenian representatives. After the first contacts in Switzerland with the Yugoslav exiles, Pašić proposed a conference in Corfu to discuss the principles of a future Yugoslav state.⁵⁹

The idea of the Serbs was to drive the Yugoslavs under the Karađorđević dynasty. An idea that the representatives of Croatian and Slovenian exile seemed willing to accept, but that would definitely put out of action the interests of the Montenegrin monarchy. This possibility was viewed with particular alarm by King Nikola, who had already tried to raise awareness among the Entente governments of the danger posed by a Serbian hegemony on Yugoslav peoples.⁶⁰ The Montenegrin king also tried to persuade Sonnino that using adequate amounts of money it was possible to enable the representatives of the Yugoslav movement against the Serbs.⁶¹ This hypothesis, however, soon appeared unlikely given the results of the Corfu meetings, when Croatian, Serbs and Slovenes representatives agreed on the formula, supported in particular by Trumbić, of “one people with three names”.⁶²

⁵⁷ For the consequences of the Proclamation on the Italian-Montenegrin relations see F. Le Moal, *La France et Italie dans les Balkans 1914-1919. Le contentieux adriatique*, Hartmann, Paris 2006, pp. 228-229.

⁵⁸ See V.S. Mamatey, *The United States and East Central Europe 1914-1918. A Study in Wilsonian Diplomacy and Propaganda*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1957; L.E. Gelfand, *The Inquiry American Preparation for Peace*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1963.

⁵⁹ I. Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins History, Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1988, pp. 122-123; I.J. Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference. A Study in Frontiermaking*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1963, p. 25.

⁶⁰ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. VII, doc. 284.

⁶¹ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. VIII, docs. 77, 158.

⁶² Ivi, docs. 446, 456, 609.

On 20 July 1917, the Corfu Declaration proposed in fact for the first time the real possibility of a Yugoslav state under the Karađorđević.⁶³ For the declaration had not bid Montenegrin delegates, a few days later, the Unionists led by Radović stated that Montenegro, exhausted its historical function, was ready to join a kingdom of Serbians, Croats and Slovenians.⁶⁴

Sonnino's reaction to these events could only be negative, with a renewed support for King Nikola, also through new funds and renewed pressure on the allies to affirm the principle of Montenegrin independence.⁶⁵ This line, however, could not guarantee a positive result, given the difficulties in defending the King and the role that France was assuming in the Balkan policy. Nikola's expressions of sympathy for the Yugoslav cause, actually merely instrumental declarations in defense of its own dynastic interests, did nothing but cause further irritation in Sonnino.⁶⁶ In fact, King Nikola continued to support the idea of freedom for Yugoslav peoples outside Serbian hegemony and remained highly critical toward Pašić and Trumbić.⁶⁷ In the same days, in an attempt to counter the growing Yugoslav propaganda, the foreign minister of Montenegro met with the US ambassador in Paris, William G. Sharp, to which asked American backing.⁶⁸ In the following months, Nikola continued to have sporadic contact with the allied representatives, but in fact, even when Lloyd George on 5 January 1918 made reference to the restoration of Montenegro, this was less a generic statement of the war aims than an indication of a clear commitment to the future of that country.⁶⁹ In the case of the United States, the situation was even more difficult considering that in his Address delivered on 8 January at a joint session of the two Houses of Congress, Wilson had referred to the evacuation of the Austro-Hungarian forces from Montenegro, although without mentioning the future status of the country.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, thanks to the Italian pressures towards the end of 1917, official contacts had been established between the US and Montenegrin government in exile. Italians had in fact asked the

⁶³ Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, cit., pp. 123-125; Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference*, cit., pp. 25-26.

⁶⁴ AMAE, Guerre Mondiale, 331, Delaroché-Vernet à Ribot, Neuilly 17 agosto 1917.

⁶⁵ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. IX, docs. 128, 275.

⁶⁶ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. XI, doc. 331.

⁶⁷ Ivi, docs. 464, 482.

⁶⁸ Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1917, Supplement 2, *The World War*, vol. I, United States Government Printing Office, Washington 1917-1919, p.146.

⁶⁹ FRUS, 1918, Supplement 1, *The World War*, vol. I, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 15.

State Department to grant the establishment of a Montenegrin legation in Washington, anticipating an official request by the Montenegrins to Sharp. The response of the American secretary of state Lansing was positive, albeit founded on a degree of caution, waiting to see first how the British Government intended to act.⁷¹

However, the time for the government in exile was to expire, given the growing wire of Yugoslav propaganda and its many supporters in America. As it is clear from the reports of the US representative in Corfu, Percival H. Dodge, there was no doubt about the intentions of the Serbs with respect to the future arrangement of Montenegro.⁷²

The End of Montenegrin Independence

The end of WWI for Montenegro merges with the broader Adriatic question. This is not only related to the Italian eastern border and the fate of Albania, but actually at least partly to the future of Montenegro as well. If it was already evident in the final stages of the War that Montenegro had few chances to maintain its independence, in the early months of 1919 the Italian government still thought possible to use somehow the Montenegrins to embarrass Belgrade.

In September 1918, in view of the promising developments of the Balkan front, King Nikola began to think about the establishment of a Montenegrin Legion to be sent to the front. This initiative was at first received with interest by the Italians but openly opposed by the French government.⁷³ Given the clear position of Paris on this issue, however, Rome opposed as well to avoid unnecessary friction with the French.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Sonnino was determined to do everything in his power not to benefit the unionist's cause, also trying to get the support of Great Britain and the United States to prevent the demise of Montenegro.⁷⁵

The attitude of the Paris government against Nikola was now practically hostile, with the interruption of any subsidy and the ban imposed on the king to leave France, while the

⁷¹ Ivi, pp. 785-786. As ambassador to Washington will finally be appointed General Gvosdenović. Ivi, p. 787.

⁷² Ivi, pp. 827-831.

⁷³ Archivio Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore Esercito (AUSSME), F-1 Comando Supremo – Vari Uffici, 45/10, Missione Militare Italiana in Francia – Ufficio del Capo Missione, n. 4537, *Montenegro* (Riservatissimo), 23 settembre 1918.

⁷⁴ DDI, Quinta Serie, vol. XI, docs. 518, 559.

⁷⁵ Ivi, docs. 705, 779.

Yugoslavist movement was gaining new strength. In a memorandum submitted in October, Trumbić, after having boasted the unanimity of popular support for Yugoslavism, openly urged the US government to support the Yugoslav's cause against Italy, claiming that

America must offer her protection to the Yugoslavs in accordance to the principles laid down by President Wilson, in accordance to its traditions and against the imperialistic pretention of Italy.⁷⁶

Obviously in this view there was no room for an independent Montenegro, nor for any interpretation that went beyond the uniform acceptance of the Belgrade leadership.

In the meantime, allied troops on Macedonian front had managed to break through the enemy defenses starting an unstoppable advance that eventually ended the war in the Balkans. With the advance through Kosovo and the Sandzak of Novi Pazar the Army of the Orient of General Franchet d'Espèrèy prepared to enter northern Albania and Montenegro. While in Paris the Allies were seeking a solution to the division of occupation zones, the various contingents in the field put into practice a race to the actual conquest of the territory.⁷⁷ At the forefront of the French and Serbian forces were bands of *komitadi*, which established a first contact with Montenegrin population playing a leading role in the affirmation of Serbian authority.

Meanwhile, the Italian Chief of Staff, General Armando Diaz, ordered the Italian troops to participate in the occupation of Montenegro along with French and English forces, but only after previous agreements with General Franchet d'Espèrèy.⁷⁸ However, on 6 November 1918, Sonnino stated that these directives did not exclude the Italian troops entering Montenegro also without the participation of other allied forces.⁷⁹ Though Italian troops occupied Ulcinj, Bar and Vir Pazar, which eventually became inter-Allied garrisons under Italian command, occupations performed by the Serbs and the pro-Yugoslav attitude of the French military already outlined an attempt to create a de facto situation and the likely defeat of the Legitimists.⁸⁰ With the Austrian surrender it was also occupied Kotar, while the attempt to reach Cetinje was halted by Serb and

⁷⁶ FRUS, 1918, Supplement 1, *The World War*, vol. I, p. 866.

⁷⁷ DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. I, docs. 13, 14, 25.

⁷⁸ Ivi, doc. 7.

⁷⁹ Ivi, doc. 31.

⁸⁰ AUSSME, F-1, 45/9, *Direttive occupazione Montenegro (1918)*.

Montenegrin unionists forces.⁸¹ A few days later, involving a US detachment, a new attempt was put in place but failed causing a minor diplomatic incident. The Italian Minister President, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, however, was opposed to further occupations in Montenegro in order to avoid unnecessary disputes with the Serbs, preferring to seek the consent of the other powers, especially Washington. These hopes proved futile due to the favor with which Wilson looked to Yugoslavia's cause, as also demonstrated the disappointing results of King Nikola's appeals to the American president.⁸²

Meanwhile, the Serbs had acted rapidly. On 15 October 1918 Belgrade organized a Central Executive Committee for Unification of Serbia and Montenegro to schedule the unification process; with this decision Serbia abolished the legal Montenegrin parliament. Moreover, on 25 October the committee had decided to schedule a nationwide election with new election laws, to form a parliament to decide the form and process of unification of Montenegro with Serbia. The methods of this election were openly contested by the Montenegrin government in exiles as well as from many others in the country. With the war drawing to a close, there were various initiatives to formalize unification and organize various assemblies in the areas under Serbian control. Among them, the Great National Assembly of the Serb People in Montenegro, also known as the Podgorica Assembly, organized on 24 November 1918 by a Serbian government committee.⁸³ At this time, in Montenegro there were two parties, known as the Greens and the Whites, in favor of a confederation and unification, indeed annexation to Serbia, respectively.

In the Assembly the two opposite sides of White and Greens were both but not equally represented.⁸⁴ Hence, some of the members demanded that Montenegro's independence be restored prior to any discussion about union with Serbia. This proposal was refused by the president of the Assembly Savo Cerović; thus on 26 November it was unanimously adopted a

⁸¹ Ivi, 45/8, Regio Esercito Italiano – Comando Supremo – Ufficio Operazioni, *Intervento delle truppe americane in Montenegro*.

⁸² In a note of December 10, the Montenegrins openly accused Belgrade of wanting to exclude the Montenegrin representatives from the forthcoming Peace Conference. DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. I, doc. 514.

⁸³ Cfr. S. Pavlović, *Balkan Anschluss: The Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of the Common South Slavic State*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 2008; Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, cit., pp. 284-286.

⁸⁴ The Whites won at all locations except Cetinje, but in Bijelo Polje, Plav and Gusinje the electors were actually appointed by the local community, and never properly repeated.

resolution deposing King Nikola and his dynasty from the throne, and the merging of Montenegro with the Kingdom of Serbia.⁸⁵

The Parliament continued its session until 29 November 1918, when a five members Central Montenegrin Committee for Unification was appointed.⁸⁶ The Assembly convened for the last time on 27 December 1919 to elect the Montenegrin delegation to the Collective National Representing Body of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes that was to draft the new Constitution.

Nikola and his Government in exile in Neuilly discarded these decisions, as illegal, and called forth the Montenegrins not to accept the annexation.

On 1 December 1918, it was proclaimed birth of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, while Italy began to openly consider arming and supporting the Greens. Italy's support of the January uprising was eventually seen as part of a larger military and diplomatic effort to stretch the already frail newly created Kingdom of SHS in order to make it easier for Rome to dispute its undefined and internationally unrecognized borders. This is not to deny that there was an independence party in Montenegro willing to fight against the union with Serbia.

In January 1919, the French newspapers favorable to Serbia published the Belgrade's note, announcing the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, in addition to the decadence of the Montenegrin dynasty; news that was accepted with no critics in Paris and Washington.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, in Cetinje some anti-Serbian groups were organizing to oppose the country's dependence from Belgrade and demanding for an inter-allied occupation. This, however, did not constitute a threat to the Serbs that now had full control of the country.⁸⁸ Notwithstanding, the unrest eventually led to a real uprising when the Greens, led by Krsto Zrnov Popović and Jovan S. Plamenac, supported by the Italians, resorted to rebellion in an attempt to restore independent Montenegro. The Christmas Uprising occurred in and around the

⁸⁵ On the Podgorica Assembly see FRUS, 1919, *The Paris Peace Conference*, 1919, vol. II, pp. 349-351.

⁸⁶ Moreover, on 17 December 1918, the Assembly members sent a copy of the Montenegrin Crown to King Petar I Karađorđević with a delegation that went to Belgrade led by Metropolitan Gavrilo.

⁸⁷ On the reactions of American diplomacy see FRUS, 1919, *The Paris Peace Conference*, 1919, vol. II, 355-366.

⁸⁸ S. Pavlović, *Balkan Anschluss: The Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of the Common South Slavic State*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 2008.

town of Cetinje on 6-7 January 1919. Though the rebels had some thousand armed men, the Serbian Army quelled the rebellion in blood, isolating Cetinje and Nikšić.⁸⁹

On 7 February, through a statement by the Secretary of State, the United States recognized the union of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.⁹⁰ A few days later, the State Department communicated to the ambassador of Serbia to have taken note of the establishment of a Montenegrin Grand National Assembly and the deposition of Nikola and his dynasty, accepting without comment what happened in Podgorica.⁹¹ Meanwhile, all attempts by the government in exile to be credited at the Peace Conference were unsuccessful.⁹² The US government also received protests from Montenegrin groups hostile to union with Serbia. Nevertheless, when King Nikola asked for a meeting with Wilson, the President refused on the advice of Lansing, stating that “it would be unwise at the present time to have an interview with him”.⁹³ In fact, the US government had already decided to support the Yugoslavs and all communications that did not correspond with the ideal image presented by Belgrade were simply ignored.⁹⁴

At this point the Americans proposed the withdrawal of allied contingents from Montenegro to let people decide freely of their destiny; a solution which, however, would have simply left free hand to the Serbs and that the Italian government objected, asking instead for the withdrawal of Serbian troops and the return of King Nikola.⁹⁵ The British had doubts about the proposed withdrawal as well, probably fearing the violence that would follow.⁹⁶ However, Paris and London were against the return of Nikola. In late February it was reached a vague agreement on the evacuation and in March, the US contingent withdrew from Kotor, while the Italians refused to leave the country in the absence of a general agreement. Only after the French decision to leave Kotor, the Italians began to withdraw their own garrisons from Montenegro. The departure of the French marked the end of the inter-allied command in Kotor and the effective isolation of

⁸⁹ Some form of little guerrilla resistance continued until 1926.

⁹⁰ FRUS, 1918, Supplement 1, *The World War*, vol. II, p. 899.

⁹¹ Ivi, pp. 899-900.

⁹² FRUS, *The Paris Peace Conference*, 1919, vol. I, pp. 254-255. In fact the admission of Montenegro to the Conference was the center of many doubts but very few serious discussions, considering what was happening in the country. Ivi, pp. 308, 387, 393, 398.

⁹³ Ivi, pp. 368-370.

⁹⁴ Ivi, pp. 371-372.

⁹⁵ DDI, Sesta Serie, vol. II, doc. 210, 253.

⁹⁶ Ivi, doc. 320.

the Italians. Nevertheless, at least until September 1919, the Italian Ministry of War was still contrary to the withdrawal from the Montenegrin port.

In addition, Italians had planned the return in Montenegro of men loyal to Nikola to counter the Unionists, thus opening a new political game, which characterized the weeks following the end of the War and that with ups and downs lasted throughout 1919-1920, when there were still some clashes between Serbs and Montenegrins.⁹⁷ On 24 February 1920 the Italian Minister President Nitti proposed without success to the allies to discuss the situation in Montenegro, defending its right to independence against the excessive power of Belgrade.⁹⁸ It was a rearguard action with well little chance of success as evidenced by the French decision of June 1920 to close its embassy in Cetinje.⁹⁹

It is however important to note that still on 18 September, 1920, for the forthcoming election of the Constituent Assembly of the Kingdom of SHS, the British representative in Belgrade Alban Young, wrote to the British Foreign Minister Lord Curzon considering advisable to reaffirm that “The union with Montenegro was not in the eyes of the Powers such an established fact as the new Electoral Law presumed, and that some exigencies of our own might have to be met”.

Actually however, Young had not received clear instructions from London on how to address the Montenegrin issue, if not the declared intention of Curzon to support free elections. In his analysis of the situation Young was able to grasp all the issues related to the forthcoming Constituent Assembly and the future of Montenegro, and concluded his report by stating that

I must confess that the Constituent Assembly seems to me to contain potentialities of violent discord, and given the nature of the different peoples who will be represented in it, I should think that the only safe method of avoiding a lapse in anarchy will be for the responsible leaders to force through a practically agreed scheme.

⁹⁷ AUSSME, F-1, 45/10, *Insurrezioni in Montenegro*.

⁹⁸ Documents on British Foreign Policy (DBFP), First Series 1919-1925, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London 1944-1958, First Series, vol. VII, doc. 24 and Appendix 2 to no. 24.

⁹⁹ DDF, 1920, Tome II, doc. 154.

I must once again earnestly express my opinion that if we want peace in this corner of Europe we should abstain from enquiring too closely into the extent to which the democratic principles of free elections and self-determination are applied in practice.¹⁰⁰

Curzon's answer came on October 29, with a note announcing the result of conversations that took place in London with the Yugoslav representative, from which emerged the decision of the British government not to create additional obstacles to the solution of the Montenegrin issue once provided adequate guarantees on the democracy of the electoral process. This position was, however, to deal with the effective action of the Yugoslav authorities in Montenegro, despite the proposals to send an international commission to verify the proper conduct of the elections. In a few words, Curzon wanted guarantees on the democratic nature of the elections and the process of unification, before officially recognizing the demise of Montenegro.¹⁰¹ This position corresponded, at least formally, to Italy's legitimist line, which obviously had very different purposes, but as far as we can recognize, a general interest in compliance with the Montenegrin rights.

The independence of Montenegro was not officially recognized by the Powers until 1922. During this period, annexation was supported by Paris and Washington, and independence by Rome, while London was somewhat ambivalent, suppressing reports about method practiced by Serbia, and backed by French officers, to fight the Greens. The real conclusion of the Montenegrin issue were however to come only in 1921 with the death of King Nikola and the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo which provided a solution to the troubled Italian-Yugoslav relations, therefore eliminating the last obstacle to the general recognition of the Serbian supremacy in the Yugoslav space.

¹⁰⁰ DBFP, First Series, vol. XII, doc. 399.

¹⁰¹ Ivi, doc. 424.

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