

THE SERBIAN RIGHT-WING  
PARTIES AND INTELLECTUALS IN  
THE KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA, 1934–1941

*Edited by*  
Dragan Bakić



INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES  
OF THE SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS

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## Table of Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i> .....	7
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	11
<i>Introduction</i> .....	13

### PART 1

#### Conservative Authoritarianism: the Yugoslav Radical Union (JRZ) and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS)

##### **Dragan Bakić**

<i>A Makeshift Party: Conservative JRZ under Milan Stojadinović</i> .....	33
<i>Troubles at Home and Abroad: JRZ under Dragiša Cvetković</i> .....	81
<i>A Failed “Leader” and the Serbian Conservative Core: Milan Stojadinović and the Short-Lived Serbian Radical Party</i> .....	159

### PART 2

#### Outright Fascists? The Yugoslav National Movement ZBOR and Svetislav Hodjera’s “Borbaši”

##### **Rastko Lompar**

<i>True Believers or Latecomers? Dimitrije Ljotić, ZBOR and the Nature of Fascism</i> .....	193
<i>The Yugoslav National Movement ZBOR and Nazi Germany 1935–1941</i> .....	225
<i>The Yugoslav People’s Party “Borbaši”: A Fringe Extreme Right-Wing Party in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia</i> .....	247

**PART 3**  
**The Serbian Right Wing and Yugoslavism**

**Dušan Fundić**

*“Being capable or incapable of governing a great Yugoslavia”: Yugoslav Nation-Building in the Ideology of the Serbian Right Wing* ..... 277

*An Uncomfortable Relationship: The Serbian Right Wing and the “National Minorities” Question* ..... 323

*Extremes on the Margins: Serbian Right-Wing Nationalism in a Comparative European Perspective* ..... 351

**PART 4**

**Between Conservatism and Fascism: Prominent Public Figures**

**Svetlana Šeatović, Dragan Bakić**

*Miloš Crnjanski, the Serbian Right and European Dictatorships* ..... 377

**Svetlana Šeatović**

*Radical Right-Wingers among Men of Letters: Vladimir Velmar-Janković and Stanislav Krakov* ..... 407

*Dragiša Vasić before the Second World War: from Leftist to Right-Wing Conservative* ..... 437

**Vladimir Cvetković**

*Church Dignitaries and their Disciples: Svetosavlje, Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism: Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović, Dimitrije Najdanović and Djoko Slijepčević* ..... 459

*Bibliography* ..... 501

*List of Contributors* ..... 537

*Index of names* ..... 539



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## **PART 4**

**Between Conservatism and Fascism:**

**Prominent Public Figures**

*(Svetlana Šeatović, Dragan Bakić, Vladimir Cvetković)*



# Dragiša Vasić before the Second World War: from Leftist to Right-Wing Conservative

**Svetlana Šeatović**

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**D**ragiša Vasić, a lawyer, writer, and politician, represents quite an atypical political and literary figure in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia before the Second World War because of his controversial opinions considered close to the left-oriented political groups in the 1920s and a number of legal processes in which he defended communists. Then, from the beginning of the 1930s, and especially because of his role in the Serbian Cultural Club (Srpski kulturni klub, SKK) and his editing of *Srpski glas* (Serbian Voice), the organ of SKK, he was placed on the right wing of the Serbian political and cultural scene. Who was Dragiša Vasić?

## **Biographical information, political involvement, and literary oeuvre - general background**

Dragiša Vasić (Gornji Milanovac, 2 October 1885 – Stara Gradiška camp, 1945) finished primary and high school in Gornji Milanovac. Prior to the First World War, he studied literature and law in Belgrade. Thus, according to his educational background, he was a literature professor and a lawyer. He became a barrister later. Vasić fought in the Balkan Wars (of 1912-1913) and participated in the famous Battle of Kumanovo and the Battle of Bregalnica. He entered the First World War, during which he participated in the Battle of Kolubara during November and December 1914, with the rank of reserve Lieutenant. He retreated through Albania and Corfu with the rest of the army and

the Serbian Government during the winter of 1915 and 1916. He also participated in the breakthrough of the Thessaloniki Front in the autumn of 1918.

Prior to that, he had been deeply disappointed with the Salonika trial, in which Vasić's cousin, Ljubomir Vulović was convicted of attempting to assassinate Prince Regent Alexander in Corfu,<sup>1</sup> together with Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević – Apis and other members of the Black Hand, a conspiratorial officer organization. He (and many other Serbian officers and public and political figures) was revolted by the conduct of Regent Alexander, which would color his later political activities.

He left the testimony on the entry of the Serbian army in Novi Sad in the *U gostima* (*Paying a visit*) short story from 1922. His testimonies, from the war and the first post-war days, occasionally intertwine with literature from the point of view of a patriot without any particular political beliefs, except for the bitter disappointment by omnipresent corruption and political deals.

In the summer of 1919, he was assigned to the Potiska divisional district to carry out investigative work, but it was already on 1 November that he handed over the duty asking to be discharged from military service. He was awarded a gold medal for zealous service on 11 April, 1920<sup>2</sup> for the war merits. Deeply disappointed by the new state and the automatic acceptance of the former Austro-Hungarian army officers into the new Yugoslav army, resentful of the Salonika show trial,<sup>3</sup> Vasić resigned from military service.<sup>4</sup>

Since 1920, he edited the opposition periodical named *Progres* (*Progress*) in which he was critical to those in power. According to Miloš Timotijević, that was the reason why he was called up again and sent to military exercise in Prizren where he was directly engaged in

<sup>1</sup> Miloš Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i srpska nacionalna ideja* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2019), 92–193.

<sup>2</sup> All information cited according to: Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i srpska nacionalna ideja*, 202–203.

<sup>3</sup> The reasons for Vasić's detachment from the newly created state and critical attitude towards the official policy are given in Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i srpska nacionalna ideja*, 204.

<sup>4</sup> Aleksandar Lukić, *Jugoslovenska republikanska stranka u političkom životu Kraljevine Jugoslavije (1920–1941)* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2020).

operations against the Albanian insurgency. He then organized camp exercises for soldiers.<sup>5</sup>

He wrote about memories of suppressing the Albanian rebellion in the book named *Dva meseca u jugoslovenskom Sibiru* (*Two Months in the Yugoslav Siberia*).<sup>6</sup> That book was also a summary of Vasić's disappointment, the retrospect view and reminescences of liberating Prizren, Kosovo and Metohija in 1912 and a parallel with the current experience of "political" exile on the first front-line of the war that was underway despite the end of the First World War. Vasić was then ignored by the military authorities for a long time. It was not until 1936 that he was promoted and became the Reserve Major.<sup>7</sup> In 1925, Vasić published the book named *Devetsto treća* (*Nine hundred and Third*) in which he presented the information on the May Coup and the brutal murder of King Alexander I Obrenović and Queen Draga which is yet another reflection of his relationship towards the royal family of Karadjordjević.

The core of crucial and literary most successful collection of short stories named *Utuljena kandila* (*Dimmed Candle*) from 1922 was the historical event of the Serbian army's retreat through Albania. He published the novel *Crvene magle* (*Red Mists*) in 1922 in which he criticized communism considering it a transitional infatuation and an idea that

<sup>5</sup> Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i srpska nacionalna ideja*, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Vasić spent two months from 4 September until the beginning of November 1920 in the south of Metohija, in Prizren. On 15 November 1920, immediately upon his return, in the article "Two months in the Yugoslav Siberia" in the *Progres* magazine he stressed that three months ago in the editorial board of this periodical he "[...] raised his vigorous and severe charge, and then stood against the government that, even though it was informed in a timely manner about the long-lasting preparation of Albanians, it showed negligence and the lack of will, allowing our rare and weak crews on the border front over there be butchered, enslaved and destroyed. Many people thought that the *Progres* prosecution was slight overreacting [...] because the harsh true is that our government leads a painful humiliating policy of pampering the Albanians that is paid with millions of dry gold, imitating Austria's policy; divide and rule [...] that territory is plagued by unprecedented corruption of police authorities, whose organs, uniformed anarchists, represent a separate world doing whatever it wants given the lack of control." See – Dragiša Vasić, *Dva meseca u jugoslovenskom Sibiru* (Niš: Talija Publishing, 2020), 13–17.

<sup>7</sup> Vasić, *Dva meseca u jugoslovenskom Sibiru*; Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i srpska nacionalna ideja*, 206.

would not find a lasting stronghold in the politics worldwide. Vasić arouse the anger of the communist movement with that novel, but on the other hand, he defended their members as their lawyer with much success. Vasić opened a law firm in Belgrade in 1921, and in January next year at the famous Vidovdan process, he defended a communist Spasoje Stejić together with others charged with attempting to kill King Alexander. At that time, Vasić established friendly ties with the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža.

In the course of 1927, Vasić went to the Soviet Union with Vladislav Ribnikar and Sreten Stojanović on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution. Upon his return in 1928, he published a book *Utisci iz Rusije* (*The impressions from Russia*) consisting of articles that presented the new order and social reality in the first communist country written for the *Vreme* (*The Times*) daily. About the same time, he became one of the editors of the *Nova literatura* (*New literature*) left-wing periodical. It should come as no surprise then that in Serbian society and literary circles Vasić was considered a communist supporter until the 6 January 1929 dictatorship.

With the support of academician Slobodan Jovanović, Vasić was central to establishing the SKK in 1937. From the very beginning, Vasić was one of the important personalities in SKK and the editor of its periodical *Srpski glas* (*Serbian Voice*). By doing so, Vasić was engaged in the protection of Serbian national interests he considered compromised, just like many prominent personalities from his circle, especially after the formation of the *Banovina* of Croatia in August 1939 as part of the agreement between the Prime Minister, Dragiša Cvetković, and the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, Vladimir Maček. Thus, Vasić's attitude at that phase was once again opposite to the official policy and the royal family of Karadjordjević, this time represented by Prince Paul (after King Aleksandar's murder in 1934). However, suspicions regarding his alleged affinity towards the left wing continued to follow Vasić. It was even claimed – never proven in any way – he had contacts with the Soviet intelligence service.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Mira Radojević, "Dragiša Vasić i Sovjetska Rusija," *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju*, 92 (2015): 77–91. Radojević points out that the main difficulty of historiog-

Within SKK, Vasić worked on promoting the idea of uniting Serbian historical and ethnic territories into a single administrative unit within the federalized Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Just before the Axis powers' attack on Yugoslavia in April 1941 he was on the trip in Montenegro. After the capitulation of Yugoslavia, Vasić went to his birthplace of Gornji Milanovac and completely withdrew from public life after the first (communist) partisan squads were formed, fearing that communists would take revenge on account of polemics he had had with them prior to the war. He approached the Chetnik Detachments of the Yugoslav Army, a royalist and nationalist movement led by Draža Mihailović and as of mid-August 1941 he found himself in their headquarters on Ravna Gora. Vasić was one of the most prominent members of Mihailović's Central National Committee in the first two war years. Towards the end of the war, he separated himself from Mihailović and went together with the Montenegrin commander Pavle Djurišić in the direction Slovenia. After the Battle of Lijevo polje, he surrendered to *Ustaša* units and was killed in April 1945 in the Stara Gradiška camp, or, according to some, perhaps in the Jasenovac camp in May 1945. There are three unofficial versions of his death, so it can be said that he finished his life as controversially as he lived it.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that during the civil war he stood on the side of the opponents of the victorious communist movement marked the treatment that his literary work had in the post-war "New" Yugoslavia.<sup>10</sup> Professor Lompar defines Vasić's controversies and position as follows:

raphy in the study of this Serbian writer is "the fact that historical sources regarding Dragiša Vasić's political involvement are insufficient and unclear, primarily those concerning issues that give rise to the majority of doubts, namely his attitude towards Soviet Russia and alleged assumptions about his contacts with the Soviet intelligence service." (particularly 77-78).

<sup>9</sup> According to the third version, he was not killed in 1945, but "after having surrendered to partisans he was quickly transferred to Moscow, where he died in 1956. The information on Vasić's monument in Moscow also appear in some other spoken testimonies." – Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i srpska nacionalna ideja*, 487.

<sup>10</sup> When it comes to literature, Vasić was absolutely prohibited as a writer and political figure after the Second World War. The renewal of interest in his work began in the 1990s when Gojko Tešić edited his short stories (*Sabrane pripovetke Dragiše Vasića*, 1990). The first scholarly work dedicated to Vasić's literary oeuvre named

Dragiša Vasić represents a special position within Serbian art and [...] within Serbian intelligentsia. This attitude implies some kind of active participation and simultaneously willingness to sacrifice. [...] Dragiša Vasić [...] belonged to a culture differing from the culture of our modernists. And that reversal of patriarchal into modern culture, and the turnaround of one literary experience from the field of a certain realistic narrative in another field of meaning, marked Dragiša Vasić.<sup>11</sup>

### Ideological bases of moving from the left to the right

Apart from political trials in which Vasić defended communists, as has been pointed out, there are no other pieces of information and indications that he belonged to any leftist organization. However, those trials brought him to the sphere of left-wing intellectuals and those critical of the government. It is in this context that his friendship with Krleža (as of 1919) can be understood. There are no grounds, however, to support claims that Krleža inspired Vasić's activities during the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, Vasić was part of the society's democratic structure and firmly committed to upholding all forms of freedom and rights, as stated by Mira Radojević:

Owing to these new relationships in his political-professional activity and such life orientations Dragiša Vasić was long classified among leftists flirting with the KPJ [Communist Party of Yugoslavia]. These bourgeoisie intellectuals, primarily republicans, although bitterly dissatisfied

*Moderna vremena u prozi Dragiše Vasića* was written by Milo Lompar, whereas the only extensive historiographic work so far is the already quoted monograph of Miloš Timotijević. Vasić's literary oeuvre consists of the novel named *Crvene magle* and short stories collections *Utuljena kandila*, *Vitlo i druge priče*, *Pripovetke*, *Pad sa zgrade*, and the historiographical prose *Devetsto treća*. Vasić is the author of several important journalistic and travel pieces of writing: *Karakter i mentalitet jednog pokolenja*, *Utisci iz današnje Nemačke*, *Dva meseca u jugoslavenskom Sibiru*, *Utisci iz Rusije*.

<sup>11</sup> Milo Lompar, "Tradicionalni modernizam Dragiše Vasića," in *Život i delo Dragiše Vasića, zbornik radova*, ed. Borisav Čeliković (Gornji Milanovac, Muzej rudničko-takovskog kraja, 2008), 227–230.

<sup>12</sup> Radojević, "Dragiša Vasić i Sovjetska Rusija," 83. Radojević is cautious when writing how hard it is to say to what extent Krleža influenced Vasić to visit the Soviet Union.



Dragiša Vasić (Courtesy of Wikipedia)

with the situation in the country, rarely became its members. They were close to communists in terms of antimonarchical views, advocating social justice, and respect they felt for those ready to die for their beliefs. On the other hand, as democrats, they did not accept any dictatorship, including that of the proletariat. Such a mood can be noticed in the case of Dragiša Vasić.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–81.

On the other hand, there are travelogues and reports gathered in the *Utisci iz Rusije* book bringing some details from the Soviet Union and indicating the apparent affinity and respect for Russia as the place of origin of the Slav culture. It should be noted that numerous intellectuals in Europe wanted to see that other, new world, the organization and principles of that newly created state. The same motives<sup>14</sup> could be observed among some intellectuals in Yugoslavia, and especially Serbia where a large number of white Russian emigrants escaped, but any connection with Soviet Russia and its culture was severed. That sort of criticism was made to the authorities by sections of bourgeoisie open to gaining knowledge about the new state and its social order, but also guided by the need to preserve the connection with Russian culture. In *Utisci iz Rusije*, Vasić writes about celebrations, social relations, the position of women, and the position of old class enemies who converted. He notices great care for workers and is delighted by elements of social policy, but he is disappointed by rejection of God. He came with an open mind and wanted to grasp the true state of affairs:

We came to the country we love, in which we have never been before. And we came to the country about which we have heard and read the most opposite pieces of information. We are obsessed, however, with a vow to bring the most honest report to our country, the most accurate information.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the basic goal to portray the Russian country he and his fellow countrymen love, Vasić critically considers the advantages and disadvantages of communism. Thus, he writes about being in the Red Army officer's apartment, but he also transmits letters from Belgrade from the emigrant family in Russia to their relatives, an old family of generals in Moscow. He also visited St. Petersburg realizing that Moscow was one thing, which he even liked, and the glorious St. Petersburg, the city of tzars, was something completely different, reduced to mere survival with no traces of spirituality. Vasić could still see the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow together with many church towers, later to be demolished. At the end of the travelogue, he sums up

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 82–85.

<sup>15</sup> Vasić, *Utisci iz Rusije*, 155.



his impressions, "What I have seen and witnessed now is something vast and infinite, it is a spiritual uproar, it is a historical uproar, and it is a human uproar." Vasić concludes *Utisci iz Rusije* by writing the following:

Russia should not and must not be observed differently than in relation to the West. Considered separately, in her great experiments and strained searching, she is observed with distrust from that West, that, according to general impression, became stale, no longer seeking for anything, and without will to seek, and that keeps believing in some kind of right to judge her with a particularly strict criterion, and from the position of its spiritual ditchwater in which, also according to its own admission, it is stuck to the throat. However, while leaving Russia we also brought with us, among other ones, the conviction that no one has the right to despise the unremembered yet positive efforts we saw being made there.<sup>16</sup>

Vasić, however, did not bring the enthusiasm with social order but energy, the power of the Russians to suffer and bear, giving up the benefits offered by the Western world, with the idea of building better society and the world which they would not see during their lifetime. That type of moral giants and colossuses growing in endless Russia was his main impression that stood opposite the materialized and barren Western world without enthusiasm he saw among the Russians.

It should be noted that Vasić rarely uses the term Soviet Union in his text. He looks for the Russian history, culture and new society everywhere. This is the evidence of his attraction to the history of spiritual connections between Serbs and Russians, and his interest in the old and classical culture. These travelogue-reportages are anything but an apologetic expression of adoration and inclination to left-wing ideas. They present the view of an openminded intellectual familiar with Western values who went with his friends to see this new and altered Russia, while not forgetting the sufferings of emigrant families and the injustice they suffered in the Soviet social experiment. Vasić was curious enough and without prejudice, ready to meet another, still fledgling social system and with respect for the sacrifice made for the purpose of reaching the bright future of a new man and a new age. He did not fully share the ideological views of his hosts, but he was in awe of the

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 275–277.

effort made by an individual for the sake of the collective. After the experience of travelling across Russia, however, Vasić became more and more detached from communist topics, but he continued to defend communists probably because of his sense of social justice. A series of assumptions, recollections and various memories have created a myth of Vasić as a Soviet spy, who was simultaneously, as of 1937, a right-wing politician, which forms a kaleidoscope of controversy without evidence. Finally, a third version of the end of his life, namely that Vasić was deported in Moscow at the end of the war, where he allegedly lived until 1956, is also associated with the legend about his spy connections with the Soviet Union, or at least his sincere faith in the “historical role of Russia”, which was “the holy space”, whereas Moscow was the “Third Rome” for him.

The concept of sacrifice and sacrificing for the people, the responsibility for the people articulated through the activities of political parties, cultural or other art movements, in Vasić’s work, has an unparalleled place in Serbian culture. That sacrifice was eventually paid by personal suffering. For that reason, Vasić’s model of activism in culture and art, which can be seen from a short review of his biography, is a pattern of long duration often criticized as being based on the Kosovo myth and the related sacrifice for the people even when stakes are the highest of all. Precisely because of the aforementioned, any study of Vasić’s political and literary work requires an appreciation of the conceptual forms and models of the Serbian society in the first half of the twentieth century. As Vasić’s friend and the first biographer Mladen J. Žujović put it:

Dragiša was primarily interested in an individual and because of the individual, he was interested in society. It was first of all our individual, our social life and problems, so tightly related to Serbian national, constantly endangered interest, a matter of fatherland. Dragiša Vasić was, above all, a patriot. That is why it is impossible to talk about him regardless of the events from our national and political past that took place during his life.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Mladen J. Žujović, *Eseji o ljudima i događajima 1903–1959. Dnevници i beleške*, vol. 5, ed. Teodora Žujović (Vrnjačka Banja: Izdavač autor, 2004), 82.

### Travelogues, Germany–Russia and the view to the right

To understand and analyze Vasić's relationship towards Serbian national idea and identity issues, crucial sources are his literary and journalistic pieces of writing, as well as the editorials of *Srpski glas* he was in charge of. In his first historiographic work *Devetsto treća*, he presented the view that it was not archival material but rather the "absolute truth," which derived from the testimonies of the participants in the events that counted:

It can only be believed by a person who never watched the creation of History, because every person who experienced several events and participated in them must be convinced that the full and real truth could not be found in the documents.<sup>18</sup>

It is one of the forms of his confidence in the genius of the people, oral literary creation and personal experience, as the only real form of truth that he relies on in literary works, travelogues and historiography.

Intertextuality is the basis of Vasić's narrative procedure. It represents a foundation for his conceptual and historical sources included in the texture of the novels and short stories narrative. Journalistic texts are very close to artistic literary texts. That is the space for analyzing ideas and streams the author moved through. "Understanding history" is one of the key concepts in Vasić's prose and journalism, because all his writing, whether it concerns the fates of his heroes or the topics of journalistic pieces, is essentially conditioned by the "winds of history" affecting individuals and peoples. Travelogues dedicated to Germany and Russia named *Utisci iz današnje Nemačke (Impressions from today's Germany)* from 1922 and *Utisci iz Rusije* bring pictures of the two nations, two cultures, the West and the East, through which Vasić would see more clearly what was in store for Europe and the world in the following decades. Vasić's prediction from the travelogue would come true:

Because no one can be as submissive as German masses. And tomorrow that will be seen. A terrible military machine that was torn to pieces, is being recovered, adjusted and reassembled again to become a danger

<sup>18</sup> Dragiša Vasić, *Devetsto treća* (Niš: Talija izdavaštvo, 2020), 19.

above all dangers all over again. Because this is a nation which, even if they wanted, could not be anything but a machine for eternal fighting.<sup>19</sup>

After emphasizing the rise of Germany as the state and the vitality of its people, Vasić would, in *Utisci iz Rusije*, point to another form of the ascent of a Slav people and a large ideologically grounded state. In the context of the experience gained by visiting these two major countries and understanding their differences, Vasić would be encouraged to turn to the national question of the Serbian people.

### A turning point from the left-wing towards the right

In the interview with Miloš Crnjanski for the *Ideje (The Ideas)* periodical, on 13 October 1934 Vasić revealed his attitudes about the time he lived in, critically assessed the development of society and art, and pointed out his own ideological and literary views.<sup>20</sup> The interview was published only four days after the murder of King Alexander in Marseille which marked the end of the policy of integral Yugoslavism he had imposed. Therefore, this interview in which Vasić talked about his literary engagement, the experience of war, war days, practice of law, political attitudes, the role of art in modern society, represents one of the very important sources.

In the way of introduction Crnjanski stated that Vasić's law office was one of the largest in Belgrade, making an extraordinary impression, but as an experienced writer and journalist he concluded that professional work "is not obvious in his literary oeuvre, but that does not mean yet that this influence is not considerable in his creation."<sup>21</sup> After having been asked by Crnjanski if the present was suitable for literary creation, Vasić provided an answer that indicated his attitude towards the place of literature in modern society:

Everything decreases and spoils. The race of great people disappears and humanity is becoming perverted. Chaos in ideas and conflict is omni-

<sup>19</sup> Dragiša Vasić, "Utisci iz današnje Nemačke," *Srpske književne teme. Publicistički spisi* (Niš: Talija izdavaštvo, 2020), 504.

<sup>20</sup> Dragiša Vasić, "Gospodin Dragiša Vasić, književnik, govori o svom književnom radu (čitaocima "Ideja")," *Srpske književne teme*, 85–92.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

present. We are aware of complains that conditions for literary creation are worse than before. But we need to ask ourselves when and where were these conditions more favorable? Our age is turbulent, more turbulent than any of the previous ones and everyone has their unfruitful years.<sup>22</sup>

A particularly important aspect of this interview was the question related to the spiritual relationship between the East and West, and what the meaning of their clash was. The question Crnjanski asked referred to the social tensions and political relations between the democratic West and the Soviet East. Vasić briefly described their relationship as follows:

The spiritual struggle between the East and West is the old struggle for humanity which does not rush, but loves to crawl. Otherwise, there is a costly, risky and bloody search – and contraindications in that search were revealed too flagrantly. On one hand, there is unhealthiness, originated from the disagreement of institutions and customs, and on the other side there is the great ideal.<sup>23</sup>

When asked if the Serbian people were closer to the East or West, Vasić unequivocally expressed his opinion: “Of course I think the Serbian people were closer to the East. It seems obvious to me.”<sup>24</sup>

Vasić responded to these questions seven years after visiting the Soviet Union. That was also the period of strengthening of left-wing ideas and influence in Serbian literature, as well as the Communist Party’s increasing activism throughout the entire Kingdom of Yugoslavia. That is why Vasić, in this important interview, emphasized that great works in Serbian literature could only emerge if the writer “goes among people”, and that, when going to his hometown, Gornji Milanovac, he remained himself under the impressions of nature and ordinary people. However, the departure of educated people from the countryside presented yet another fact changing society and weakening the sources of literary creation. Separated from the people the writer lost a primordial connection with the topics and reality of the rural world in which he lived – that is a price paid for urbanization. At that moment, Vasić had already penned a series of short stories and novels inspired

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

by and thematically relying on the experience of the First World War. Asked by Crnjanski about Yugoslav literary unity, Vasić remained restrained – he only said it was “still developing.”

In that year, 1934, Crnjanski also asked Vasić whether he opted for the Cyrillic or Latin alphabet. Vasić’s attitude was explicit: he was absolutely for the Cyrillic one because the alphabet was not a technical tool but rather “spiritually important,” while “the real source of our literature is in a folk poem.” The issues related to Yugoslav literary community, as well as the alphabet, indicate the significance of such orientations in Yugoslavia at the moment when the matters of national identities, their status, and the decentralization of the country arouse. Vasić’s attitude towards the sources of literary work found within the national community and folk poems shows his political views were no longer leftist, or communist but directed to the “genius of people” and folk creation. This interview summarized Vasić’s literary work, which would no longer be pursued after 1934 as he himself announced: it was impossible after the entire day in office to produce the works of art.

However, despite professional busyness, Vasić would be involved with the SKK, publish shorter texts in the *Pravda* (*The Justice*) periodical and other newspapers, and edit and contribute to *Srpski glas*. It can ultimately be said that the interview in *Ideje* clearly marked a shift of his political paradigm.

### **The Serbian Cultural Club and *Srpski glas* – Vasić “turns to the right”**

Vasić joined the SKK founders in 1937, on the basis of the recommendation of Slobodan Jovanović, the founder, main ideologist, and the president of the organization,<sup>25</sup> and immediately became vice president (Nikola Stojanović, a prominent Serbian representative from Bosnia and Herzegovina, was the second vice president). In 1939, he was appointed the editor-in-chief of *Srpski glas*, the SKK’s newsletter. The SKK

<sup>25</sup> Boris Milosavljević, “Pitanje pokretača i osnivača Srpskog kulturnog kluba,” *Tokovi istorije*, 1 (2012): 27–52. See also Slobodan Jovanović, “Jugoslovenska misao u prošlosti i budućnosti,” in *Sabrana dela*, 12, eds Radovan Samardžić and Živorad Stojković (Beograd, BIGZ, Jugoslavijapublik, SKZ, 1990–1991).

stood for placing the Serbian national issue in the foreground as a reaction to significantly changed circumstances after the demise of integral Yugoslavism. Professor Dimić explains this process as follows:

Denied by Serbian political parties, this matter was openly initiated for the first time towards the end of the second decade of life in the Yugoslav state. National demobilization noted only then by Serbian intelligentsia, took on worryingly large proportions. [...] The awareness of the Serbian state, its state traditions, territorial scope, and recognizable identity was suffocated in various ways, primarily by constantly active state ideologues. The fact that the Serbian Cultural Club (SKK) and its advocates were the product of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's social and political relations was indisputable. At the moment of deep turmoil, the shaping of attitudes and determination to start broader economic, cultural, political, and social actions were articulated in the form of the Serbian Cultural Club and the remodeling of the state among the elite social and political circles in the second half of the 1930s. That wide and necessary action's ultimate goal was envisaged as the Alliance of cultural societies that should influence the strengthening of Yugoslav thought and the conversion of Yugoslavism, as an abstract ideology, hostile and denying towards the Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian national identity, in the "organic community of all living forces, simultaneously feeling their own peculiarity and their interdependence" through its constructive approach.<sup>26</sup>

Out of 70 SKK members, as many as 22 were University professors, ministers, assistant ministers, leading industrialists, judges, lawyers, and writers (Mladen Žujović, Veselin Čajkanović, Vaso Čubrilović, Marko Car, Aleksandar Belić, Justin Popović, Milan Grol, Desanka Maksimović, Isidora Sekulić, etc.). In December 1936, about 70 representatives of the Serbian intellectual elite gathered in Belgrade and held the SKK's first, founding assembly. At the SKK's first regular assembly held on 4 February 1937, Slobodan Jovanović succinctly defined its purpose:

According to its founders, the Serbian Cultural Club should be the place of meetings and talks for anyone interested in the matters of Serbian national culture.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ljubodrag Dimić, "Srpski kulturni klub i preuredjenje države," in *Dijalog povjesničara-istoričara*, ed. Igor Graovac (Zagreb, Zaklada Friedrich Naumann, 2000), 359–360.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Dimić, "Srpski kulturni klub i preuredjenje države," 359–360.

However, Boris Milosavljević has found that SKK's main features were of political nature despite having been established as a "non-political" organization:

Although at the explicit request of the Ministry of Internal Affairs during the registration the club's rules claimed that it was a non-political society, the Serbian Cultural Club was a political organization since the beginning. Compared to Serbian parties and organizations functioning at that time, it differed insofar as it simultaneously advocated the ideas of democracy i.e. parliamentarism and Serbian patriotism. While the commitment to parliamentarism was shared by all the parties for which Serbian voters could vote, the Serbian Cultural Club opened the Serbian question i.e. politically articulated the interests of the Serbian people in Yugoslavia.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the still present lip service to integral Yugoslavism, the SKK immediately, since its founding, raised its voice to interpret Serbian national interests, which was closely related to Serbo-Croatian differences. After the Cvetković-Maček Agreement and the formation of the *Banovina* of Croatia, the SKK's activities radicalized and it was then that the initiative to start *Srpski glas* was launched. The SKK insisted on the completion of national integration of the Serbian people, putting an end to regional differences separating people from Šumadija, Dalmatia, Herzegovina and other provinces. First of all, SKK was a great critic of the Cvetković-Maček Agreement; it did not dispute the Croats' right to their own national identity, but it was decisively in favor of maintaining Yugoslavia. As already noticed, SKK advocated the idea of parliamentary democracy in the conditions of an authoritarian monarchy, swimming against the current of the time and development of the political situation in the country. Jovanović maintained ties even with the Soviet legation, and supported establishing a debate club to discuss Marxist theories at the Faculty of Law.<sup>29</sup> Vasić was also among the ones writing about the creation of SKK and Jovanović's substantial importance in the text named "Slobodan Jovanović – on his seventieth anniversary."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Milosavljević, "Pitanje pokretača i osnivača Srpskog kulturnog kluba," 29.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>30</sup> Milun Stijović, ed., *Srpski glas*, fototipsko izdanje (Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 2004), 20.



SKK members considered themselves entitled to point the “general direction for national policy.” Their action implied national discipline and activism. Moreover, they considered intelligentsia alone capable of leading towards enlightened patriotism and overcoming party divisions; they advocated a “popular cultural turnover” that would remedy all omissions related to the Yugoslav unification and shortcomings that had deteriorated or degraded the status of the Serbian people in Yugoslavia. The SKK championed tolerance within Yugoslavia, criticized a false Yugoslavism and stressed the necessity for equal rights for Serbs and Croats in the same community of people.

*Srpski glas*<sup>31</sup> was published once a week, from 16 November 1939 to 13 June 1940 when it was banned. After the military coup of 27 March 1941 when the government and Prince Paul were overthrown, the periodical was launched again. Only one issue was published prior to the German attack on Yugoslavia. A total of 32 issues were printed, all of which, except the last one, in the “Proizvodjačko-izdavačka zadruga Sloboda” printing house in Belgrade that belonged to the editor-in-chief, Vasić.<sup>32</sup> Both the periodical and SKK endeavored to overcome party divisions of the Serbs, which set them apart from the Slovenes and Croats who were rather homogeneous in their main political parties. Every *Srpski glas* issue contained strongly worded editorials on the first page. In the very first issue the unsigned programmatic article titled “Our Word” was published as a joint editorial stance. The responsibility certainly rested with the editor-in-chief – Dragiša Vasić. This editorial stated loud and clear what the purpose of the periodical was:

It was the right time for a pure Serbian voice to be heard. Even large, foreign nations have difficulties to manage in the labyrinth of ideas and interests that currently rule the world. Both large and small ones [have difficulties] because the instinct of the people’s self-preservation became the only safe guideline. Therefore, we have also decided to rely on the healthy Serbian instinct that created Šumadija and Serbia from the Pashaluk of Belgrade and later Yugoslavia. A Serbian voice needs to be heard free of any foreign theories and party prejudices in order to have the

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 26–29.

strong Serbdom permeate Yugoslavia with its fighting spirit and pass it as a legacy to future generations. We will not and can not step back. We have always gone and shall go ahead.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, although it advocated peace and the spirit of tolerance, a harsh critical text written by Milutin Devrnja titled “Desanka Maksimović’s Three Poems,”<sup>34</sup> in which he described her poems published in the *Srpski književni glasnik* (*Serbian Literary Gazette*) as being “defetist” because the poetesse pleaded for peace, was published in the first issue of *Srpski glas*. She failed to find a point in sacrificing and indicated its insignificance and meaningless in the poem “To the future soldiers.” This shows that the associates of *Srpski glas* called for action and praised the meaning of sacrifice for ideals and national interests, which was, as we have seen, to a large extent built in the cultural patriotism model of SKK and Vasić himself.

The slogan “Strong Serbdom – strong Yugoslavia” was part of the periodical’s subtitle. *Srpski glas* invited the Serbs from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina to write and send their articles, which they did. They were often signed only as a person from Lika, Obrovac or with similar signatures that were toponyms or regional determinations. Also, the periodical called for the establishment of SKK branches in those parts of the country and was concerned about the cultural life and creativity of the Serbian people outside Serbia. This was the basic idea of this newsletter and the SKK. Each issue analyzed Yugoslavism as a state and national idea, the Croatian question, and international events and the war that engulfed Europe.

In the second issue dated 23 November 1939, the untitled editorial criticized the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, pointing out it was expected to “cause tensions between Serbs and Croats to end and to create a more favorable atmosphere for their joint solution to the constitutional question.” Unsigned editorials can be regarded as having been authored by Vasić because he explained himself, in the first issue, that as the editor-in-chief he assumed responsibility for each and every editorial. This one drew the attention to the spirit in which it was assumed that the agreement was made and the reality that was very different:

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>34</sup> Milutin Devrnja, “Tri pesme Desanke Maksimović,” *Srpski glas*, 68.

“Croats did not get their *banovina* with sword in their hands but through an agreement with Serbs and if around one million Serbs were left in it, that was done in the hope they would be treated as brethren.”<sup>35</sup> On behalf of the editorial board Vasić was concerned about the Serbian people in the Croatian *banovina*. *Srpski glas* correspondents reported on the removal of boards with the Cyrillic alphabet, interethnic conflicts, extreme propaganda war against the Serbian population in Dubrovnik, Subotica, Mostar, Trebinje. There was increasing number of articles regarding the position of Serbs in Dalmatia, Herzegovina and other regions, and the growing extreme Croatian nationalism. In the third issue dated 30 November 1939 certain S.M.D. published a piece titled “Greater Serbian Nationalism” that stated:

Therefore, everyone criticizing the post-war public life of Yugoslavia should bear in mind that if it is marked by a Serbian seal, it is a seal of Serbian exhaustion, Serbian confusion and, above anything else, the absence of Serbs, genuine Serbian forces, the absence of real Serbia, that started and carried out national liberation and unification by employing the power of spirit and character to a larger extent than force of arms. That Serbia was no more after the war.<sup>36</sup>

Vasić’s editorial dated 14 December 1939 under the title “Whom do we bother?”<sup>37</sup> was a direct response to criticism leveled at the periodical from the Croatian side. Vasić pointed out that *Srpski glas* in just one month of publication defended and did a great service to Serbdom in Yugoslavia. But *Srpski glas* irked the Zagreb-based *Obzor* which commented on its contents in several issues and claimed that its founders were animated by Greater Serbian chauvinism and that the periodical was no different than the notorious Belgrade newspaper *Balkan* (*The Balkans*). Vasić argued with the *Obzor* editorial board pointing out that Yugoslavia was a place for both nations, but if Croats were keen on negotiating with Serbs, there was no reason to fret. Vasić continued:

*Srpski glas* pointed out the idea of Yugoslavism and the ideals of nation state, political rights and freedom, which accounted for pre-war Serbia’s

<sup>35</sup> Untitled editorial, *Srpski glas*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> S. M. D., “Velikosrpstvo,” *Srpski glas*, 87.

<sup>37</sup> Dragiša Vasić, “Kome smetamo?,” *Srpski glas*, 109.

greatness and reputation and led to the creation of Yugoslavia. That must be the basis of the Serbian revival today as well. That is what *Srpski glas* wants and fights for.<sup>38</sup>

In the same issue, Vasić informed his readers that the “Filip Višnjić” cultural association was again granted permission to work in Bijeljina. In general, he paid much attention to what was going on with the Serbs in the sphere of culture.

On behalf of the editorial board, Vasić urged the necessity to call for parliamentary elections. That was the main political topic as Yugoslavia, after the dissolution of the National Assembly as part of the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, was ruled by the government that relied on the extensive use of regulation with legal force. In the editorial dealing with the arbitrary bans on a number of issues of *Srpski glas* dated 11 January 1940 Vasić returned to the charge. He requested amendments to the Law on the Press, citing examples of two different interpretations of the same law in different parts of the country. As a lawyer he asked about the freedom of the press and what was considered slander, insult or other form of undemocratic action unworthy of the freedom of the press. Almost every third issue of *Srpski glas* until the summer of 1940 was banned.<sup>39</sup>

The main themes of Vasić and *Srpski glas* were an equitable agreement between Serbs and Croats and the return to democratic government. In the editorial dated 1 February 1940 under the title “Agreement or Disagreement,” Vasić requested an agreement “according to the ethnic, historical, or geographic-economic principles,” which actually meant according to certain clearly specified criteria instead of a combination of different principles applied in the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, but always in favor of Croats. “Serbs in Croatia” (8 February 1940) was Vasić’s editorial in which he discussed the numerical proportion of the nations living within Yugoslavia and *Banovina* of Croatia, and reminded of the glorious history of Serbs in what had once been Austria’s militarized borderland. He demanded the parliamentary elections vigorously and accused the authorities of not wanting anything to change,

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Miloš Timotijević, “Dragiša Vasić i *Srpski glas*: jedan nedovršeni nacionalni projekat,” in Čeliković, *Život i delo Dragiše Vasića*, 119–146.

let alone to revive the National Assembly and democratic instruments of government (“Within one party” dated 15 February 1940). This is a convincing evidence of the extent to which Vasić was a proponent of a democratic-liberal society and that it was strictly within the framework of parliamentary democracy that he sought for solution to national questions in Yugoslavia, especially that of his own Serbian people.

Vasić condemned and attacked anything that went beyond legal norms and an equitable democratic agreement between Serbs and Croats. He sent an open letter to the minister of army and navy with the question “Where does this lead to?” drawing attention to the activities of Maček’s illegal military formation called the Croatian Peasant Defence that produced the first class of officers examined by Maček himself. The Croatian leader finished his speech by declaring they would achieve what “all the Croatian people aspire to” through their work and discipline. Vasić pointed out the relevant articles of laws according to which banovinas did not have their own security structure, but his questions remained unanswered. In the editorial dated 11 April 1940 under the title “Our position” Vasić once again drew attention to repression and bans, but also to the Croatian extremist attitudes and the Serbian willingness to make a “fair and honest agreement”. *Srpski glas* was banned on 13 June 1940 by the Cvetković cabinet in which Maček was deputy prime minister. But brochures with only three texts emerged, explaining that Maček was responsible for banning the SKK’s organ.

It should be said that in a series of texts Vasić and his *Srpski glas* criticized their own Serbian people, its lack of unity, examples of moral corruption, and all those forgetting positive achievements of Serbian history. Such negative examples were considered a “weak Serbdom.” That was the antipode of the slogan “Strong Serbdom – Strong Yugoslavia.” The paper called for national unity, extolled heroism, national mythology, romanticism and the cult of victim, return to rural folk sources. In this sense, the youth was criticized for not being sufficiently nationally oriented, and such examples were listed in numerous texts, although this critique mostly referred to the city of Belgrade, in which the increasing number of students was turning to the left-wing ideas.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Milosav Jelić, „Razmišljanja o našoj omladini,” *Srpski glas*, 369; M. M., “Dužnost beogradske omladine,” *Srpski glas*, 239.

## Conclusion

Even on the eve of Yugoslavia's involvement in the Second World War, Vasić was part of the liberal faction of the Serbian political scene, but nevertheless the authorities banned both SKK and *Srpski glas* as disruptive of state interests. He thus never moved to a radical right position within the right-wing political spectrum, but his shift from what was perceived as Vasić's left-wing activism during the 1920s was presented as a dramatic turn to the right. Vasić's engagement in SKK since 1937 and editing its newsletter as of 1939 were the forms of Serbian intelligentsia's political activism in an attempt to unite Serbian political parties and represent Serbian national interests since political parties failed to do so. A realistic assessment of Vasić's political portrait has been thwarted because of mystifications concerning his alleged contacts with the Soviet intelligence service and claims that he was a free mason.<sup>41</sup> In a mosaic of different political options starting from certain, at least initial, closeness to leftist ideas, legal engagement as a lawyer to defend communists before the court, visit to the Soviet Union, to articulating purely national views as part of his involvement in the work of SKK and its mouthpiece *Srpski glas*, but always within the democratic political tradition, the impression remains that Vasić's political profile continues to escape a more precise definition.

<sup>41</sup> Under the title "Zaverenik" Timotijević states the following: "According to the previous knowledge, Dragiša Vasić was a member of one of the free-masonry (Masonic) Lodges in Belgrade" – Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i Srpska nacionalna ideja*, 369-370. On the other hand, a fundamental study on the Serb and Yugoslav Masonry does not register Vasić as a freemasonry member – see Slobodan G. Marković, *Jedan vek Velike lože SHS "Jugoslavija"* (Beograd: Regularna Velika Loža Srbije, Dosije studio, 2019).