

UDK 94(497.15)"1906/1914

THE FIRST CRITICAL APPROACH TO YOUNG BOSNIA

Mustafa Imamović
University of Sarajevo

Abstract: Today, when we are preparing in various ways to mark the Centennial of the First World War, it is unavoidable to include mention of Young Bosnia. We must remind ourselves that, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination, the Sarajevo-based Institute of History and the well-known review for social issues, Pregled, organized a "Roundtable on Young Bosnia" in 1974. This was the first such event at which Young Bosnia and its activities and goals were critically analyzed in the context of that time. Eighteen papers were presented by Arif Tanović, Nikola Babić, Vljeko Begović, Uroš Nedimović, Ibrahim Karabegović, Mirjana Trninić, Mitar Papić, Dubravka Škarica, Dževad Juzbašić, Avdo Humo, Joco Marjanović, Mustafa Imamović, Branislav Đurđev, Stojan T. Tomić, Ilija Hadžibegović, Dejan Đuričković and Franc Cengle.

The proceedings of that roundtable were published in Pregled, Vol. 7-8, in 1974. The following is the text of my paper presented at that event forty years ago.

Today, we are discussing an issue that has been a focus of historical studies for several decades now. It has already been emphasized here that the bibliography of published papers on the issue we are discussing in the narrow sense of the term amounts to over 1,700 works or, according to some data, to as many as 3,000 titles. However, despite this enviable bibliography, we must say that this problem has not been completely resolved, particularly in view of the Marxist approach to history.

I think that there are several sets of questions in this regard. I will first focus on methodological problems, even though there are several other issues to be considered. One is the issue of terminology. One can freely say that, *inter alia*, many issues of a terminological nature still remain unresolved in our historiography. Today's dis-

cussion only confirms it. It often happens that some terms denote different phenomena and relations, so that, when they are used, their true historic meaning is neither established nor defined. It creates an unclear, or even wrong, picture of the societal and historical nature and content of these phenomena and relations. We may simply take the examples of some terms that have been used several times today: revolution, people, Yugoslavism.

As soon as we define Young Bosnia and the entire so-called progressive youth movement on the eve of the First World War as revolutionary, we need to define the social content of the term “revolutionary.” There are bourgeois and socialist revolutions. Their social and historical meanings are totally different. Was the activity of Young Bosnia a bourgeois or a socialist revolution?

The term ‘people’ was also used several times today in the context of Young Bosnia. Here, again, the term “people” must be clearly analyzed, since it can have multiple meanings: ethnic, political, sociological, etc. When one says that members of Young Bosnia fought for the people, the term “people” must be clearly defined, given all its potential meanings. Without that definition, we are practically simplifying and, consequently, distorting the historical reality and the complexity of circumstances in Bosnia and Herzegovina of that time.

The notion of Yugoslavism is often linked to Young Bosnia and the youth movement. Although often used, this term is, unfortunately, not clearly conceptually analyzed in a historical sense. If we define the youth movement before the First World War, and, consequently, Young Bosnia as a part of it, as Yugoslav, we should finally unambiguously determine what kind of Yugoslavism it refers to. Does the term Yugoslav used in connection with the youth movement have simply a geographic, or a specific political, perhaps even an ethnic, meaning? There is a unitarian Yugoslavism, sanctioned legally by the 6th of January Dictatorship with the “Law on the Name and Division of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia into Administrative Areas,” adopted on October 3, 1929. On the other hand, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, during the socialist revolution, built Yugoslavism in a completely different historic sense - as brotherhood, full equality, internationalism and mutual solidarity of the Yugoslav peoples and ethnicities. Therefore, as scientists, we should finally determine whether there were, and, if so, to what extent there were, Yugoslav political ideas in the youth movement on the eve of the First World War, and what was the real content of that Yugoslavism.

Another methodological issue is the problem of the historic approach to the past, i.e., the problem of placing the observed phenomena and developments into an historic context. The historian as a person who studies past events tries to settle accounts for himself and his own time about his own past and in that manner to de-

fine the society in which he himself lives. When engaging in that process, historians should never observe phenomena isolated from the context of social developments of the given time, nor should they assume the role of judge or advocate of that time. If an historian takes either of these two positions, he deprives himself of a genuinely critical approach to the past, and he, therefore, abandons his scientific historic stance. By defending or attacking uncritically the phenomena he explores, the historian distorts the past, instead of explaining it. The past should neither be defended nor attacked, but explained and studied, so that we can avoid the danger of living it again and again. This is the essential element of the need to look into all events and developments of the past in their own historic framework, i.e. to reduce them to their true historical measure. Let us take an example from the study on Young Bosnia done by Masleša, that has been frequently referred to in our discussions today. As I recall, the last chapter of his study is titled "Where Would They Be Today." In this chapter, Masleša cites the statements made toward the end of the 1930s by former Young Bosnians Kosta Krajšumović and Pero Slijepčević, in which they say that Gaćinović and his comrades, were they still alive, would have been "either far away, in emigration, or in the prison of Sremska Mitrovica" or certainly "somewhere on the far left." Masleša, however, notices that those who survived ("with several exceptions") are today neither on the left nor in emigration, or in Sremska Mitrovica, but are teaching at universities (like Krajšumović and Slijepčević), or hold similar positions in bourgeois society. So, the answer to the question "where would they be now," Masleša concludes, can be found only if we clearly establish what was the trajectory of the consequent line of the Young Bosnia group. I think that the approach to Young Bosnia taken by Masleša can basically be reduced to the assessment that this movement was the ultimate offspring of Serbian bourgeois politics in BiH, but that it was at the same time a rebellion against the methods used by that politics. I am not sure that, when it comes to their ultimate political goals, there were any crucial differences. Masleša himself says that the majority of the members of Young Bosnian were stuck in 1918, considering that "now we must live a full and free nationalism and civic life." Today, nobody should attack them or defend them for that, let alone attach to them the desires, goals and meanings that they neither had nor could have had. The science of history needs to explain Young Bosnia within the circumstances of its members' time and place. Only in this way can its true historical achievement and relevance be determined.

One needs to emphasize that, today, there has been a lot of talk about the historical circumstances and conditions in which Young Bosnia appeared and acted. This conference has made a good contribution to the research of those circumstances and conditions. It deals mainly with Bosnia and Herzegovina, whereas perhaps a broad-

er framework needs to be considered. As has already been said, Young Bosnia was a part of the movement of “Yugoslav revolutionary progressive youth” that included, in the years preceding the First World War, mostly Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian secondary school and university youth that studied at different university centers of Central Europe.

I think that this problem needs to be viewed within these historic coordinates. The results of historic science that are already available to us give us access to such a relatively broad and critical approach. Here, I primarily have in mind the books written by Dragoslav Janković on the Corfu Conference, particularly his last work, *Serbia and the Yugoslav Question 1914–1915*, as well as the books of Momčilo Zečević, *The Slovenian People’s Party and the Unification of Yugoslavia*, and Milorad Ekmečić’s, *Serbian War Aims in 1914*.“

However, if we are discussing the Bosnian circumstances in which Young Bosnia appeared and acted, I think that the papers presented so far, which have raised several critical questions, also open the way for additional questions. Here, I will mention some of them.

The first question relates to the position and role of the workers’ movement, i.e. the Social-Democratic Party in BiH until 1914. Although we have heard here today critical polemics relating to this problem, there remains a question that requires answers from researchers: What did the term Social-Democratic Party really mean in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of the 20th century? What was its true relevance, given the degree of underdevelopment and the small size of the working class in the country? I myself have mostly dealt with the history of bourgeois politics in BiH, but the issue of social democracy has been my constant interest. I think that the Social-Democratic Party of BiH must be viewed as an embryo of the socialist revolutionary workers’ movement, which would change historical relations in this part of the world. In that respect, viewing the Social-Democratic Party from a more distant historical perspective, i.e., the time we are living in now, its activities and impact gain a totally clear historical relevance.

The second problem that has been mentioned here is a whole set of different relations that is concisely called the agrarian question. I got the impression from some of today’s presentations that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy simply did not want to solve the agrarian question. This is quite a simplification. I think that both the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and all the bourgeois political parties in BiH, including the Muslim Peoples’ Organization, were in favor of finding a solution for the agrarian question. The only problem was how and in what conditions to do it. I would remind you only that the Social-Democratic Party of BiH did not envisage the solution to this question through the confiscation of land without any compensation granted to

its owners. The authorities of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy feared primarily that the sudden solution of the agrarian question would lead to a major economic, ethnic and demographic shift in BiH, which could have threatened the position of the Monarchy in the country. One of the general characteristics of the Austro-Hungarian policy in BiH was its effort to maintain a certain balance between national-confessional groups. That is why, in the conditions of the unresolved constitutional and legal status of BiH (until as late as 1908), the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy focused on the measured resolution of the agrarian question through a gradual buy-off of serf hamlets. Such a policy suited the local Bosnian bourgeois class, which was not ready to cope, economically or financially, with the burden of resolving the agrarian question by way of a mandatory buy-off. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy opted for the mandatory resolution of the agrarian question only after the Balkan Wars and the collapse of European Turkey. That is one of the consequences of the Balkan Wars, which, in my view, has not been sufficiently explored.

The third issue I would like to discuss briefly is related to bourgeois political parties in BiH, which have been mentioned repeatedly here. There is an issue that precedes it: To what extent were these political parties in the classic sense of the term? I leave the consideration of this issue for another occasion, but I would mention only that, at the end of 1907, the Mostar-based newspaper "Narod" published an article which stated openly that in BiH "as a provisional land" (in the state and legal sense) without "parliamentary foundations" conditions do not exist for the activity of real political parties. The task, therefore, was first to fight for the resolution of the constitutional and legal status of BiH and the introduction of parliamentarism. That is why it was necessary to establish a "national organization" and not a "party-based organization." For now, it suffices to say that most of the bourgeois political parties in BiH, regardless of the existence of minor dissident groups, essentially had such a character (the Muslim People's Organization, Serb People's Organization, Croatian People's Union).

Another question is related to the position of bourgeois parties vis-à-vis the autonomy of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Until the country's annexation in 1908, the Muslim and the Serb People's Organizations openly sought the autonomy of Bosnia outside the Monarchy; they found legal ground for their demand in the sovereignty of the Sultan over the country. In their newspapers "Musavat" and "Srpska riječ," the Austro-Hungarian Empire was almost regularly called "the neighbouring Monarchy." It is understandable that, after the annexation, this rhetorical figure was abandoned, since both parties wanted to act legally in these new circumstances, and the first condition for that was the recognition of Habsburg sovereignty over BiH. After 1908, these parties sought the autonomy of BiH within the Habsburg Monarchy. It is

very probable that for Muslim bourgeois politics, the autonomy of BiH was the ultimate demand, whereas for Serb politics, it was merely a tactical constitutional demand. But one needs to keep in mind that Bosnian bourgeois politics was dominated by the concept of “real politik“ and that in certain circumstances all ethno-political groups were ready to accept the autonomy of BiH. This is valid even for the Croatian People’s Union and the Croatian Catholic Association, which otherwise openly and consistently demanded the inclusion of BiH into a Trialist Kingdom. A provision of the Muslim-Croat Alliance Agreement, signed in 1911, stipulates that Muslims were in favor of the autonomy of BiH, irrespective of the structure of the Habsburg Monarchy. This practically meant that, even in the conditions of dualism or potential trialism, BiH was to maintain its autonomous status. Croatian bourgeois politics, which had opted for trialism and the annexation of Bosnia by Croatia, practically accepted that BiH should remain a sort of *corpus separatum* even in these conditions, if another solution was not feasible.

Finally, I would agree with my colleague Dževad Juzbašić, who said that, so far, the dominant subject of historic research was Austro-Hungarian politics in BiH, while the domestic social and political movements were researched less. Our historiography is often inclined, perhaps due to its epic roots and certain bourgeois traditions that have not been overcome, to interpret almost all economic and social processes occurring in this part of the world in the past as resistance to alien rule, as if the entire history of our peoples is nothing but a constant struggle for liberation, that follows a straight line and does not have any internal social or class contradictions and upheavals. I do not want to deny or dispute the need to study the liberation movements and struggles, but I think that we also need to study more the history of society, i.e. the history of the adaptation, life and involvement of entire social or ethnic groups in certain class and political contexts, which were at the given time historically conditioned and determined.