

Nicholas J. Miller. *Between Nation and State: Serbian Politics in Croatia Before the First World War*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. xiv + 223 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-3989-4.

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The Failure of the “Civic Option”

Nicholas Miller’s *Between Nation and State: Serbian Politics in Croatia Before the First World War* presents a discussion of the politics of cooperation between Croats and Serbs in Croatia in the last years of Habsburg rule. Thus it focuses on the issue of one smaller minority—i.e., on the Serbs within Croatia, which was itself subordinate to Hungary. His focus is on 1903–1914, an era in which Croatian and Dalmatian politicians attempted to incorporate Croatia’s Serbs into a coalition which would offer joint opposition to Magyar domination. This era—the era of the Serb-Croat Coalition in the Croatian Sabor—began with the “New Course” of cooperation between Serb and Croat parties and saw that cooperation wither in the aftermath of the Zagreb treason trials of 1909 and ended with the capitulation of the Coalition to the Tisza government in Hungary in 1913. For Miller, this era was a lost (and perhaps last) “opportunity for Serbs and Croats in the Habsburg Monarchy, a period when they nearly conquered their collective mutual suspicions, which they inherited from their forebears” (p. ix).

Miller’s aim is not to provide a full political history of Croatia in the last decades of Dualism, but rather to examine the political strategies available to Serb parties in Croatia within the confines of their double-minority status. The goal of Serb politicians of all parties was to defend the identity of Serbs within Croatia and the integrity of the “Serbian nation.” Miller’s analysis of the political options available to Croatia’s Serbs centers on two parties pursuing very different paths to a defense of national identity—the Serbian Radical Party of

Jasa Tomic and the Serbian Independent Party of Svetozar Pribicevic. For Miller, these two strategies were vastly different. Tomic’s Radicals pursued a policy of close defense, seeing the Serbs of Croatia as a body quite separate from Croat society and regarding the Serbian National-Church Congress, the traditional corporate representative of Croatia’s Serbs in their dealings with imperial authority, as the proper venue of political activity. Pribicevic’s Independents pursued a participationist course—what Miller calls the “civic option”—in the Sabor, offering to pledge political loyalty to Croatia and to see themselves as citizens of Croatia who had a right to their own culture.

Between Nation and State uses the competing strategies of these two parties to examine something more than the story of political maneuvering in pre-1914 Croatia. Miller’s real interest is the larger issue of the political defense of national identity, the ability of stateless peoples—national minorities—to become full members of a political nation without losing their cultural identity. The book’s story is ultimately about the failure of Croatia’s Serb parties to find a successful path to membership in a community where cultural and political identity could be separated.

Miller argues that the Serb Radicals and Independents embodied a division between corporate (“state rights”) and individualist (“natural law”) conceptions of citizenship. This division is one which Miller sees throughout the Monarchy—between Ante Starcevic’s Party of Right

and Franjo Racki's Independent Nationals among the Croats, or between the believers in Bohemian or Hungarian state rights and the followers of Tomas Masaryk and Oszkar Jaszi. These two versions of citizenship and political identity are presented more as stages of political evolution than as ideological alternatives, and for Miller "modernity" in politics is seen as inextricably linked to a transition from corporate to individualist conceptions of citizenship. The failure of the Coalition in Zagreb is seen not just as the failure to build a successful bloc with which to confront the Magyars, but as the failure to define a conception of Croatia which would include Serbs as full citizens, a Croatia which would become "modern" in its acceptance of "natural law" political values that rooted rights and identity in the individual and not the collective.

It is important to note that *Between Nation and State* spends little time on day-to-day politics in the Sabor or on the mechanics of winning and holding influence. Miller's analysis of the 1903 elections in the border city of Zemun (Semlin) demonstrates his focus on the ideological at the expense of the concrete. Since 1888 Zemun's local government had been controlled by a German-Croat local alliance, and Croat had become the city's language of administration. The Serbian Radical Party, sensing a chance to gain control of local electoral districts, broke with its Coalition partners to win Zemun's Germans away from the local Croats. Miller faults the Radicals not so much for being short-sighted or for creating friction within the Coalition as for a failure of vision. In seizing the chance to create Serb-dominated districts and bring Serb voters into their own ranks, the Radicals fell prey to a conception of politics "as defensive tactics designed to secure the domination of their nationality in a given area instead of participating in a Croatia-wide coalition designed to assure the rights of individuals," and which neglected "a strategy designed to assure the development of the Croatian whole, for all its citizens" (p. 97). The Serb Radicals, he laments, "insisted on acting in accordance with time-honored principles: horse-trading, political bargains, personal politics...[whereas] the Independents...attempted to turn patronage politics in a constitutional direction" (p. 97). Miller seems to fault the Radicals for being a political party, and he has little good to say about the collective bargaining that forms the nature of politics itself.

For Miller, "politics in the Habsburg Monarchy traditionally focused on corporate competition: groups (religious, territorial, feudal) sought imperial favor, which would result in the granting of privileges or rights on

the basis of imperial authority" (p. 45). Such a corporate conception of politics is seen here as "anti-modern" in its essence; a "modern" conception of politics grounds identity in shared individual values and not in group membership. Miller assumes that only such an individualist vision—a vision of *civic* nationalism, in Hans Kohn's terms—can work to alleviate ethnic and national conflict and that the politics of corporate bargaining, transferred from the Monarchy to interwar Yugoslavia, implied the failure of democracy and political modernization in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Miller seems not to notice that the Independents were offering their own collective bargain not so unlike those of the past. By offering to be loyal participants in a Croatia which would respect Serb culture, the Independents were offering a loyalty-for-rights exchange not so far from that struck long ago by Serb refugees with Leopold I. Only the "modern" terminology would be different.

Between Nation and State champions the idea of civic nationalism, and Svetozar Pribicevic and his contemporaries are judged on their fidelity to that ideal, an ideal which places "civic responsibility" above loyalty to a national or ethnic group. The Independents' ultimate cooperation with Tisza and Pribicevic's postwar Serb unitarism as a Yugoslav minister are both condemned as failures of belief. Yet Miller undervalues the possibilities of corporate politics and the very real constraints faced by any party based in a national minority. For Miller, the "state rights" approach is seen as "stale" and tied to antiquated local aristocracies and patronage politics. There exists a path from "state rights" to federalism, and Miller does not consider the argument that a "natural law" civic nationalism may protect the *political* rights of individuals while still allowing a majority to dissolve the *cultural* identity of a minority.

A sense of rights rooted in the individual can well be an assimilationist tool of an ethnic or national majority. One could certainly argue that, as a minority within a subordinate province, Croatia's Serbs—as the Radicals saw—could best defend defend their cultural identity (Orthodoxy, Cyrillic alphabet) by asserting their corporate existence through such "traditional" institutions as the Serbian National-Church Congress, which carried the weight of both numbers and history. To become "political Croats," as the Independents urged, meant dissolving the potential political weight of Croatia's Serbs and risking accusations of disloyalty and treason if any Serb group ever attempted to withdraw its participation in the Croatian political order.

Nicholas Miller's depiction of political figures—Pribicevic, Tomic, the Croat leaders Josip Frank and Franjo Supilo—is deft and insightful, and his discussion of the origins of the New Course and the Coalition makes clear two usually-neglected areas: the depth of the Hungarian crisis of 1903-07, when the threat of imperial military intervention in Budapest shaped the possibilities of cooperation in Zagreb (i.e., the Fiume and Zadar Resolutions of October 1907) and the role of Dalmatian issues and figures in shaping the New Course. His analysis of Tisza's handling of the Coalition is no less incisive. While one might wish that Miller had included more information on party membership and an analysis of the Independents' base of support (and certainly more on the attitude of Belgrade to the Coalition), his discussion of both the formation of the Coalition and the Coalition's relations with Tisza in the aftermath of the 1909 trials is lucid and balanced.

Miller's final chapter embodies the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. In looking back from 1996 to the era of the Coalition, the author sees the nightmare of World War II Croatia and the slaughters of the 1990s as implicit in the failure of the "civic option" he associates with the Independents. He does not see the reasons why

a "civic" nationalism might not attract a minority group whose identity was indeed embattled, and his association of the "civic option" with a normative "modernity" allows him to undervalue the possibilities of corporate politics and a federalism divorced from territory—certainly an avenue worth exploring in a region of intermeshed nationalities.

The politics of corporate identity and imperial patronage may have offered the Serbs of pre-war Croatia a more concrete set of possibilities for protecting their identity in the face of Croat and Magyar pressure than Miller credits. Indeed, one can ask if the Croats would ever have allowed the Independents to be "political Croats" in Pribicevic's sense.

Between Nation and State offers a well-drawn picture of minority politics in Croatia. But Miller's commitment to seeing one version of political identity as normative does cloud his sense of political strategies in the context of the Monarchy.

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