

## NEW WOMEN IN A NEW STATE: FEMINIST EXPECTATIONS FROM YUGOSLAV UNIFICATION<sup>1</sup>

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This paper intends to explain not only the origins of the modern woman in a changing political and social environment in a newly established state after First World War, but also the development of ideas formulated by women in their intellectual endeavors, through their influence and criticism, and their hopes and expectations of the new state. It focuses on Croat and South Slavic spaces in the process of unification of the State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 (called the Kingdom of SHS, Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1929). This period saw the unprecedented involvement of women in political and public life with the aim of achieving political and legal equality. Examining the complex structural changes that took place amidst great economic, social, and political commotion, the paper encompasses the personalities and ideas that challenged the established understanding of the status of women and analyses the ways and forms of some of their social and public actions. The most important among them was Zovka Kveder Demetrović, a journalist and editor of a prominent women's magazine *Ženski svijet/Jugoslavenska žena* [*Women's World/The Yugoslav Woman*] whose advocacy of women's issues is the focus of this paper. It informs the reader on new possibilities of understanding the intellectual and political contribution of women, and identifies the most important, if generally unknown, women authors from the region whose work contributed to the general advancement of women's issues in the aftermath of First World War.

**Keywords:** Yugoslav unification, feminism, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, *Ženski svijet/Jugoslavenska žena* [*Women's World/The Yugoslav Woman*]

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Was it not an irony of sorts? Among weak victors and resentful losers, surrounded by talks of border reshuffling and the first ever attempt to protect minorities, the spoils of war, failing empires and great hopes for the League of Nations, the new world order established at the Hall of Mirrors missed the opportunity to acknowledge the most encouraging, and the most democratic, consequence of the Great War, that of the unprecedented involvement of women in public life and in politics. Among various decisions of the Paris Peace Conference, a particularly short-sighted one was to leave the question of women's suffrage not only out of general debate, but even without the benefit of a special commission of women members. This was Wilson's idea and he was inclined to help the cause of women's suffrage as he met with Millicent Fawcett, the influential leader of the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and her delegation. They demanded that women be represented at the Peace Conference, and had even passed a resolution calling for equal suffrage, the opening of all occupations to women, wages and salaries based on work rather than the sex of the worker, and the acceptance of an equal moral standard for men and women.<sup>2</sup> President Wilson promised that he would inquire whether the conference might consider taking up some questions of special interest to women. He did ask the allies, but they were determined to leave the suffrage issue to the decision of national bodies. Although members of the conference indeed competed among themselves in expressing, one after another, their devotion to the issue of women's suffrage, Clemenceau, Balfour, Makino and Sonnino were unwilling to accept women's suffrage as part of the conference agenda.<sup>3</sup>

Women's suffrage has been an issue in American and European politics since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was not an unfamiliar topic among the South Slavs either. Even before the Croatian *Sabor* (Parliament) debated it in 1917, several influential politicians had been advocating women's suffrage from the beginning of the century. Some of these parliamentary debates, which will be presented in this work, will explain the positions and arguments of both advocates and adversaries of women's suffrage. It is necessary to understand the circumstances that led to attempts to change the election law in Croatia in 1918, as well as to understand women's experiences in the First World War that resulted in demands for suffrage and the expectations of a small but determined number of remarkable women – suffrage activists – in bringing that particular theme to the fore.

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<sup>2</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> Quotes from Charles L. Mee, Jr. *The End of Order: Versailles 1919*. (New York; E.P. Dutton, 1980), pp. 153 and 60.

Transition from the unexpected dissolution of Austria-Hungary to the hasty establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later called the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1929) led to the strong involvement of the Yugoslav delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. Although the members of the delegation were of various backgrounds, nationalities, and professions, they were predictably all male. The only women at the delegation were an occasional typist or a translator. Going through the archives of Ante Trumbić, the president of the Yugoslav Committee (an émigré organization in favor of Yugoslav unification that operated from London until 1919), and the first foreign minister (1918-20) of the new state, one finds an occasional reference to “Mme Trumbić”, who might have helped with correspondence and fundraising. Being preoccupied with arguing over the new border settlements, establishing trust among their counterparts, and securing international recognition, the representatives of the emerging state did not pull the issue of women’s suffrage out of the top drawer. The members of the Committee were certainly aware of the patriotic work of famous suffragettes, since they exchanged letters with Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), who did not mince her words, as she asked them “to send munitions in a form of a check or postal order to the Victory Fund”, and provide support for her journal *Britannia*, but that was the extent of their involvement in women’s suffrage.<sup>4</sup> Back home, hopeful women, as well as women’s organizations, harbored great expectations of the new state. Why is it that grand designs – those of women’s equality, as well as of national unity – soon proved to be an illusion?

### **Zofka Kveder and *Women’s World***

During the war, the Yugoslav woman had indeed little to say in public about what she wanted, what her thoughts were. Our circumstances pushed us into deep silence. The war came down on us with its iron fists, so that it sometimes felt as if our thoughts were frozen inside our heads. Men were silenced, women were silenced. Our whole nation sank into silence, into unspeakable painful apathy. We lay down facing the earth, powerful and fearful winds blew above us, and heavy and reckless feet stumbled over our hearts. But the nation cannot stay still for years! The yearning for freedom, for outspoken and public expressions of thoughts and feelings cannot be suffocated year after year! When the first ray of hope and better times shone over dark wartime skies, we came alive as the earth comes alive into Spring. What sweetness it

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<sup>4</sup> AHAZU, (Arhiv HAZU), Trumbić, JO 144/23.

was to think! What relish it was to freely utter one's thoughts! To speak out loudly and fearlessly about one's longings and hopes!

Zofka Kveder, What Do We Want?<sup>5</sup>

The New Woman came of age among the rubble of the Great War. Although this excerpt may be typical of any wartime situation, this was in fact a statement, part of a program published in the *Ženski svijet* [*Women's World*], the first feminist journal in Croatia in 1917. Its editor and founder was Zofka Kveder (1878-1926), a Slovenian journalist, writer and an early feminist activist, whose feminist and socialist cosmopolitanism abjured any kind of national demands if they were not in the service of Yugoslav unitarism and unification, which she, like many other Yugoslav nationalists, considered in itself a revolutionary act. Her feminist and Yugoslav orientation developed gradually from her grim teenage experiences. Zofka Kveder was born in Ljubljana to a family of a railway worker, a father who was not only frequently absent, but also an alcoholic. Her letters to her mother reveal a traumatized, lonely and scared young woman trying to come to terms with the demands that life had put before this teenager. "I am alone! I am afraid of myself, of the world and of life".<sup>6</sup> She was educated at the elementary school outside Ljubljana, and returned to Ljubljana to attend the Lichenthurn Institute, an all-girls high school run by nuns. Although she did not graduate, because she fled Ljubljana, first to work for at an attorney's office, then to head for Trieste, where she started to work at the post office. In Trieste, which was at the time the center of Slovene national activities, she found a place at the editorial offices of the journal *Edinost* [*Unity*] and *Slovenka* [*Slovenian woman*], indeed the first Slovenian journal devoted to women's issues. There, Kveder started to publish some of her early articles at the turn of the century. She was interested in women's emancipation as well as the general position of women in society and she started to publish many articles on this theme. In Trieste, she started a romantic affair with Vladimir Jelovšek, who was both an aspiring writer and a medical student, whom she met first through his writing, and whom she then followed all over Central Europe. Smitten with Kveder, Jelovšek dedicated some of his poetry to "some witty Slovenian woman – my own Sonja". Concerned about the state of women workers and the education of women, (as well as her own education) she traveled to Switzerland, first to Zürich, then to Bern, where she enrolled in the University of Bern. She supported herself by writing in German, and con-

<sup>5</sup> Zofka Kveder, Što hoćemo? *Ženski svijet*, I, no. 1, September 1, 1917, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in: Alenka Šelih et al. (eds.), *Pozabljena polovica: Portrteti žensk 19. in 20. stoletja na Slovenskom*, (Ljubljana: Tuma, SAZU, 2007), p. 154. Also: [www.pslk.zrc-sazu.si/sl/literarni-atlas-ljubljana/zofka-sofija-kveder/](http://www.pslk.zrc-sazu.si/sl/literarni-atlas-ljubljana/zofka-sofija-kveder/) accessed on July 3, 2019.

tinued her travels to Munich and Prague. In Prague she continued her complicated relationship with Jelovšek that lasted a decade and (eventually) ended in marriage. The years she spent in Prague proved fertile, not only because she gave birth to her daughter Vladimira, but because she published several books there, most notably *Misterij žene* [*The Mystery of Woman*]. That novel was at the time harshly criticized by Slovene literary critics, because of her focus on violence, pain and the exploitation of women. When Jelovšek graduated in 1906, they moved to Zagreb, where Zofka Kveder became the editor of *Frauenzeitung* [Women's Journal], a supplement to the German-language Zagreb newspaper *Agramer Tagblatt*, which earned her certain prominence in intellectual circles, and among the activists of Slovene and Croat women's movements as well. She traveled extensively in the countries of South East and Central Europe, developing a network of contacts with prominent women of the time, notably Martha Tausk (née Frisch), wife of Victor Tausk, a lawyer and the unfortunate student of Sigmund Freud. Herself a social democrat, Martha Tausk left a telling description of the major features of New Women, as she and her circle of friends understood the term at the time:

We were at the time looking for kindred "spirits", liberated, good, sincere, free from prejudices, courageous people, who dared to rebel against conventions and the "petty-bourgeoisie", and some among us managed to preserve that "alien to the world", "crazy", impractical", "immature" enthusiasm (that we hoped to keep) until we turned grey, and Zofka was like that.

Martha was even surprised that Zofka, whose image of an unconventional Slovenian writer preceded her, did not show "any sign of a bluestocking. Young, beautiful, vivid, as a person unpretentious and sincere".<sup>7</sup>

For all her true qualities, Zofka was unhappy in her marriage, did not know how to come to terms with her husband's unfaithfulness, and tried to commit suicide, before divorcing him in 1911. Several years later, in 1914 she married Juraj Demetrović (1885-1945), a publicist and a politician, and, from a very early age, a member of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia-Slavonia and a fervent advocate of Yugoslav unitarism. After the First World War, he joined Svetozar Pribičević, the most influential Serbian politician in Croatia-Slavonia, and was elected a member of the Constitutional Assembly of the new state in 1920. After the introduction of the Vidovdan Constitution, Demetrović was the King's representative for Croatia-Slavonia. Following Pribičević's lead, he supported his alliance with Stjepan Radić, the leader of

<sup>7</sup> Dragana Tomašević, *Sve bih zemlje za Saraj'vo dala: Žene pišu i čitaju grad* (Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga 2010), pp. 129-133.

the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), in the oppositional Peasant-Democratic Coalition (SDK, 1927-28). During the Sixth of January Dictatorship of King Aleksandar (1929-1934), which followed Radić's assassination in the Belgrade parliament, Demetrović supported the dictatorship and became a government minister. These controversial moves did not make him popular in Zagreb. Even though Demetrović fell into marked disrepute in the 1930s, Zofka had suffered ostracism in the Zagreb social and journalist circles much earlier, and was frequently the subject of criticism and ridicule. All that, as well as the trauma of her oldest daughter's death (she died of Spanish fever during her studies in Prague), worsened her health. Moreover, her husband's unfaithfulness made her despondent. She committed suicide on November 21, 1926 and was buried at Zagreb Mirogoj cemetery. In a show of unitarist zeal, three women, a Slovene, a Croat and a Serb, spoke at her funeral.<sup>8</sup>

Her tragic end notwithstanding, Zofka Kveder was a prominent figure in Zagreb literary and social circles. In a story about her, written for *Ilustrovani list* [Illustrated Journal], she was presented as a "very energetic, self-reliant and emancipated woman", the model of a modern intellectual who contributed greatly to Croatia's women's movement.<sup>9</sup> Zofka Kveder's claim to this distinction lay in the founding of a women's, indeed feminist, journal in September 1917. It had the rather general name *Ženski svijet* [Women's World]: *a monthly for women's cultural, social and political interests*. Zofka Kveder later explained that she wanted to call it *Jugoslavenska žena* [The Yugoslav Woman] from the very beginning, but the "name at first had to be harmless enough not to attract unnecessary attention of the Austrian-Hungarian rulers".<sup>10</sup>

*Ženski svijet* published articles on diverse topics of interest to women, but the issue of suffrage was the one that drew the attention of the public and politicians alike.

## Election Law – The Failure of Suffrage

One of the ways to assess the circumstances of Croatian women at the end of Austria-Hungary is to understand that women's suffrage was an issue at the core of political struggles before and during the First World War, as part of the wider national struggle of the Croats that started from as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1903 a prominent journalist Marija Jurić Zagorka, one of the most influential women in Croatia at this time, wrote

<sup>8</sup> Šelih et al., p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> *Ilustrovani list*, 5, January 31, 1914, p.113.

<sup>10</sup> "Zašto Jugoslavenska žena?" *Jugoslavenska žena*, II, no. 11, November 1, 1918, p. 466.

about the need for the inclusion of women in the national struggle aimed in particular against Magyar hegemony in the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy. A proponent of the political ideas of Stjepan Radić, the president of the Croatian (People's) Peasant Party (H(P)SS), who publicly advocated women's suffrage from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zagorka was trying to motivate the women of Croatia to join in the national struggle, which was to be founded on democratic principles. The national question, in her view, would have to include the improvement of education opportunities for women, the organization of national women's associations, modeled on similar Polish, Czech, Slovenian and Russian examples, as well as the general improvement of national well-being.<sup>11</sup>

It was, therefore, not surprising that Zagorka passionately advocated the 1917 attempt to change the election law in Croatia in favor of women's suffrage. She understood the demand for women's suffrage as part of widening the democratic base of Croatia's electorate. One of the arguments that opponents of suffrage frequently used was the lack of a women's movement in Croatia. Zagorka responded by stressing "the particular circumstances of the Croat nation". Unlike women in England, Croat women had no need to protest in the streets, by demanding separate rights, but they considered national rights as their own. Nations that longed for independence did not distinguish between women's rights and men's rights, and "Croat women suffered equally and struggled equally with men for the national cause, and therefore have not developed a separate feminist movement".<sup>12</sup> Zagorka, who was a seasoned political correspondent for the Croatian press from the Budapest Parliament, informed readers about the attempt of an unidentified Hungarian feminist to lure Croatian women away from "the Croatian-Hungarian political disagreements", and to demonstrate together with Hungarian women for women's suffrage. Zagorka represented the South Slavic women at the Prague Slavic Women meeting in June 1913.

Although the government's proposal for election reform, which was finally accepted by the Croat-Serb Coalition majority in the Croatian Sabor, left women in Croatia without suffrage, it was nevertheless important that the public debate went on for the most part of 1917. A vocal part of this was Zofka Kveder's programmatic text in the first issue of her paper entitled "What Do We Want?" which discussed the position of women in the circumstances of the First World War. Her general argument, which was broadly shared among

<sup>11</sup> Marija Jurić Zagorka, "Hrvatice u narodnoj borbi", *Obzor*, no. 90, April 21, 1903. Quoted from: DATABASE: Women and Social Movements, Modern Empires since 1820 (WASME).

<sup>12</sup> Marija Jurić Zagorka, "Hrvatska izborna reforma i žene", *Ženski svijet*, I, no. 4, December 1, 1917, pp. 145-146.

various members of the international women's movement, was the impact of the war experience and the ways in which women, who did not want the war, became actively involved in it. The demand for peace was not a new one, but it was in Kveder's case combined with the demand for national, Yugoslav unification. "The response to the heroism of the men who went to the front was the heroism of the women who stayed at home. It was gender equality brought about by suffering".<sup>13</sup>

Demanding equality as well as peace came at a price; Zofka Kveder was denied a passport and was therefore barred from participation as the Croatian representative in the Hague Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom of 1915. The authorities refused to issue passports to her and her colleague, even though some very influential people in Croatia vouched for them. In accord with some of most prominent women activists at the time, Zofka continued to argue for the pacifist orientation of women in general. She also called for the national unification of the South Slavs, openly displaying her support of integral Yugoslav nationalism, a *bête noire* for Austria-Hungary. She considered all that a part of the progressive agenda that would inevitably lead to "light, happiness, liberty!"

Women earned their equality, and it came at a high price during the war, as it should be the foundation for:

the new times and the new life, which have begun to rise from the ruins of the old. **A woman should not be a second class being, just because she is a woman.** During this awful war, unlike any previous time, she has shown her value and has testified with her actions that she was indeed a pillar of society. She took as her own the thought of humanity. Where there was pain, there was a woman to relieve it. Women were everywhere among the first to discuss the establishment of a common human community.<sup>14</sup>

Kveder assumed that some of the unresolved women's issues would be tackled in the immediate future. The women's movement, in her view, was not a product of "the affectation of male impersonation", but a necessity brought about by enormous changes in society at large. Therefore, the equality principle demanded responses to the issues of the pay-gap, the openness of professions to women, and the social position of women. Kveder foresaw the coming of the New Age that would allow for the development of women and their talents, and the new state that was on the horizon which would without doubt ensure social care, the political and social equality of all citizens, and the free development of capable women.

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<sup>13</sup> Zofka Kveder, "Što hoćemo?" *Ženski svijet*, I, no. 1, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



At the parliamentary session on December 13, 1917, arguments were presented against women's suffrage by the members of the government coalition. Većeslav Wilder, member of Napredna stranka [the Progressive Party] reported to the Parliament that there were several suggestions (although *innocent and weak*) to introduce women's suffrage in Croatia. He acknowledged that the arguments were without doubt:

strong and powerful, especially for small nations, which are in need of assembling the whole nation, and taking care of each and every unit of the nation, and women represent half, and maybe more, of the whole population.<sup>15</sup>

He repeatedly praised women's participation in the war efforts, an argument previously discussed not only by women themselves, but also by the leader of the opposition Stjepan Radić. Apart from the social-democrats, Stjepan Radić was the only politician in Croatia who in this early period understood the importance of women for democratic and party mobilization. The Croatian (People's) Peasant Party (HPSS) was therefore the first party that invited women to participate in the sessions of its main assembly, beginning in August 1910. Radić supported women's suffrage, equal pay for equal work, and argued that women's public activism and participation in political life was of great significance for small nations in particular. It was not surprising, therefore, that Radić guaranteed women's suffrage in his draft of the Constitution of 1921.<sup>16</sup>

In 1917, however, representatives of the governing Croato-Serb Coalition, like the *podban* (Vice-Governor) Vinko Krišković, an influential liberal and democrat elected to Parliament on the list of the Croat United Independent Party, still thought it impossible to implement such a demand. Krišković reasoned that although women's suffrage could not be denied either "from the ethical or theoretical point of view, the theoretical and ethical viewpoints are not the only ones that matter in politics". Since it took the English more than a century to debate that issue, Krišković's "pragmatic" view was that it was too early for such a huge reform.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Većeslav Wilder on women's suffrage as a part of the reform of electoral law: In *Ženski svijet*, II, no. 1 (Jan 1, 1918) p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Branka Boban on Radić's view on suffrage in: *Žene u Hrvatskoj*, 2004, pp. 191-210. See also: Branka Boban, "Stjepan Radić i Vladko Maček" in: *Nacija i nacionalizam u hrvatskoj povijesnoj tradiciji*, 2007. pp. 207-226.

<sup>17</sup> Nikias, "Rasprava o izbornom pravu žena u Hrvatskom saboru", *Ženski svijet*, II, no. 1, January 1, 1918, p. 7.

The members of Starčević's Party of (State) Right (milinovci), which was perpetually in opposition, in general supported women's suffrage, albeit with a certain census. Their representative, Cezar Akačić, quoted John Stuart Mill in his address to the Parliament, and then proposed that suffrage should be extended to "at least those women of age (24 years) that (1) had graduated from high school, (2) those that run a craft or a shop on their own, (3) and to widows who run their own estate". The additional argument was that women were already regarded as equal to men in the eyes of criminal and civil law, so there was no reason not to be equal in the eyes of politics and constitutional rights. Akačić responded to the argument that no sizable women's movement had developed in Croatia, with special mention of Marija Jurić Zagorka, who was immensely popular and whose engagement on the part of women's rights, but also with a fierce anti-Magyar stand, was appreciated by the representatives of the opposition. There was a nod to Zofka Kveder's journal and a notable mention of Marija Jurić Zagorka:

I have read recently in "Ženski svijet" [Woman's World] a nice article by Mme Zagorka where she states, and quite correctly, that Croat women were of tremendous help to Croat men in their national struggle... [A voice from the audience: Long live Zagorka!] That she encouraged men to persist, and not to give up the struggle for national rights. (...) "I know that we will not succeed in our demands today, but I also know that the day is near when in Croatia women will be equal in all their political and constitutional rights to men, because it will not be possible, not even for Croatia, to resist the new, democratic spirit of the age".<sup>18</sup>

Aleksandar Horvat, the leader of the Pure Party of (State) Right, countered the argument about the non-existence of women's movements in Croatia. He claimed that such an argument was "too westernizing". The suffrage movement presupposes that national and political circumstances in a certain state/nation are regulated/settled. The circumstances of the life of Slavs were such, however, that women and men acted together to achieve general as well as national objectives. He gave an example of the extended family life of the South Slavs, as well as the Russian village community *mir* and claimed that women were equal members of those communities, and in many cases even ran them. In comparison with the French and Russian revolutions, he asserted that, for all the ideas of humanity, the French revolution remained "anti-feminist" in its scope. Revolutionary Russia understood the achievements of women's rights as self-evident, and was, therefore, considered as ethically superior. The demand for the introduction of a separate women's movement, on the Roman or German model, and one that would be different from the

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<sup>18</sup> Ženski svijet, II, no. 1, January 1, 1918, p. 8.

existing demands of national rights that are shared by the women and men of Croatia alike, would not serve the common good.

Our ideal was for women not to lead their own, separate politics, but to take part, collaborate and help as co-fighters in the general national cause. The common struggle for national and social progress has been the wish of our women ever since they started their engagement. Why force them now to take another route?

Horvat was certain that the fact that the Croatian Parliament was debating suffrage would be of great value for women who would be able to make conclusions based on the debate. They would learn that in theory all the political parties supported suffrage, but that in practice not all the routes were marked. The issue of suffrage would remain on the agenda and would be publicly debated until “the enemies of that demand of modern democracy capitulate in front of the consciousness, agility and advocacy of progressive women. (...) The betrayed hopes of women should energize all progressive women to promote the thought of political equality in our nation so that the shameful state of inequality disappears as soon as possible. More political interest and more advocacy – that is the balance sheet of the debate on suffrage in the Croatian Sabor! (...) Let the deeds of women speak for themselves!”<sup>19</sup>

As editor-in-chief, Zofka Kveder understood the complementarity of the women’s question and the national question. As part of a public pressure campaign to change electoral law, *Ženski svijet* published information on the state of women’s suffrage in Europe and the US. It stressed in particular that Dr Sándor Wekerle, Prime Minister of Hungary, expressed his own positive view on women’s suffrage “not only because women need it, but because he believed that participation in public life will be beneficial to the Hungarian nation”.<sup>20</sup> Wekerle had changed his position considerably from 1908, when he refused even to meet with the suffragist delegation. Ten years later, however, Wekerle, as well as many other politicians, were called on to vote on women’s suffrage – and complied. When it came to influencing the public, the nationalist argument was never excluded.<sup>21</sup>

In the fall of 1918, when the November issue was ready to go into print, an extraordinary event changed the course of history for Croatia, and indeed the whole of Southeastern Europe. As the First World War was entering its final phase, with the military collapse of the German and Austro/Hungarian ar-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> “Žensko izborno pravo u inozemstvu”, *Ženski svijet*, II, no. 9, September 1, 1918, p. 386.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Sapor, *Hungarian Women’s Activism in the Wake of the First World War: From Rights to Revanche* (Bloomsbury: London, 2018), p. 26.

mies, and the general disarray in Austria-Hungary, in October 1918 the Croatian Sabor declared independence from Austria and Hungary, trying to establish control over all of the South Slavic provinces in the tottering Habsburg state. This was difficult without international recognition and in the face of Italians disembarking on the eastern Adriatic coast and the slow Serbian military occupation. The National Council, which the *Sabor* had elected as an administrative body, succumbed under this pressure and sent a delegation to Belgrade, where unification with Serbia was proclaimed in December 1918.

The November issue of Kveder's journal already bore a new title – *Jugoslavenska žena* [The Yugoslav Woman]. The subtitle also changed and the adjective Yugoslav was inserted – Monthly for the Cultural, Social, and Political Interests of Yugoslav Women. Expectations soared, as the editorial proclaimed:

Today the old is destroyed, and we women have to go forward. Look ahead for our most beautiful aim: the unification of the Yugoslavs! Let us work sincerely with all that enthusiasm and self-sacrifice a woman's heart is capable of, work for that grand idea that has saved us from centuries-long slavery. Let us not be petty, let us not think only about the interests of our tribes. It is not enough, O Serbian woman, to feel Serbian today – You have to be a Yugoslav! You are not a Croat, you true patriot, if you are only a Croat, and not a Yugoslav! And you, O Slovenian woman, forget your provincial patriotism and be a true daughter of a unified, free Yugoslavia!<sup>22</sup>

The journal regarded Woodrow Wilson as the creator of the “League of Nations” and, by default, as also the supporter of Yugoslav unification.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Kveder expressed admiration for the President, for his support of women, and women's suffrage, but hailed him also as “our savior of the new era” who would succeed in allying all nations on Earth, so that people would not slaughter each other like wild beasts anymore”. She attributed to Wilson's authority the conclusion of the “National Council” that integrated the nation and the state, and saw his involvement as a safeguard for Yugoslavia, as the state of one unified people.<sup>24</sup>

In those days of great expectations, women continued to advocate for suffrage soon after the establishment of the new state, and indeed during the sessions of the Paris Peace Conference. Aware of the need to put pressure on the politicians, as well as on the public in order to reach their goal, there was

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<sup>22</sup> Zofka Kveder, “Jugoslavenke!”, *Jugoslavenska žena*, II, no. 11, November 1, 1918, p. 434.

<sup>23</sup> Nevenka De Grisogono, “Savez naroda”, *Ženski svijet*, II, no. 10, October 1, 1918, pp. 393-394.

<sup>24</sup> Zofka Kveder, “Jugoslavenke!”, *Jugoslavenska žena*, II, no. 11, November 1, 1918, p. 433.

a women's assembly organized in the Metropol Cinema in Zagreb on Sunday, February 23, 1919, that drew "quite a crowd". Six women of diverse political backgrounds, from democrats to socialists, some of whom were representatives of schoolteachers, others of workers, spoke at the meeting specifying different aspects of the still unresolved issue of women's suffrage. Zofka Kveder Demetrović spoke twice and emphasized the disadvantages of the legal status of women. She asserted that:

On the very first day of our liberation and unification, which we have longed for, for such a long time, on October 29, the day that women greeted with joyful enthusiasm, Yugoslavia wronged women for the first time, when they were denied political representation unlike among other European nations – Russians, Czechs, Germans, and Hungarians. Only Yugoslavs circumvented women (with the exception of Novi Sad (Vojvodina) where women enjoyed a passive voting right, and were elected to the local National Council). Today's women have responsibility not only for themselves, but also for the future generations, and they have to demand political rights in the name of their daughters and grand-daughters.

A resolution was accepted by the Assembly, which stated that in the new circumstances, of liberation and unification, women demand suffrage and equal rights with all the other citizens of the New State, "because when we do all our duties, we should be given all the rights. Women have proved by working that they are perfectly capable of bearing on their back all burdens, which in the previous, patriarchal age, men carried for them." They demanded to be consulted, even before the first elections for the Constitutional Assembly, and not to be forgotten, "because we will not rest until our human rights are achieved."<sup>25</sup>

## La Femme Yougoslave et L'Union Nationale

Although women were not invited to the table at the Paris Peace Conference, their actions and demands were used by the members of the Yugoslav delegation when it was opportune to support an argument in favor of the new state. This occurred in the deliberations on the most significant part of the Conference concerning the issue of border changes. This was a matter of paramount importance for the Yugoslav delegation. The additional aspect of the Yugoslav case was that the Conference was expected to grant international

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<sup>25</sup> "Skupština žena u Zagrebu za pravo glasa", *Jugoslavenska žena*, III, no. 3, March 1, 1919, pp. 118-119.

recognition of the new state that was proclaimed in haste on December 1, 1918, in Belgrade. In the words of a historian of frontier making, “the territorial settlements of 1919-1920 – as effected through the Treaties of St. Germain, Neuilly, Trianon, and Rapallo – spelled the final victory of the nationalist struggle that resulted in the foundation of the Yugoslav state. But it was an ambiguous victory, giving cause both for satisfaction and for grievance”.<sup>26</sup> The archives of the Yugoslav Committee (Section Paris - London) contain a statement with regard to the views of Yugoslav women on national unification. That undated report was prepared sometime in 1918 at the time of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy.

We know that Austria-Hungary is not one state, but a host of states united under the scepter of a German monarch. Those states are peoples of diverse nations, but mainly Slavs. After centuries, Czechs and Slovaks in the north of Austria-Hungary, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, that are known under the name of Yugoslavs or South Slavs, inhabit the South of Austria-Hungary, suffer the oppression of the Germans and Magyars of whom the ruling spheres promote political and economic supremacy. The Yugoslavs have suffered particularly from this oppression and, to escape it, a number of them have been forced to emigrate.<sup>27</sup>

The report continues by mentioning Mme Zovka Kveder, as a “romanière croate”, who was the editor of the journal *Jugoslavenska žena* [*Yugoslav Women*], published in Zagreb, which contributed successfully to the gathering of women’s organizations and gave the floor to an exchange of ideas among Serbian, Croat and Slovene women during the last years of Austria-Hungary. It continues to describe a vivid movement in support of Yugoslav unification:

The Yugoslav women of Trieste and its suburbs wish to join with thousands of their sisters from all the Slavic parts, for the liberation and independence of the whole Yugoslav nation; they salute the declaration of the Yugoslav Club of Vienna from May 30<sup>th</sup> 1917\*, as an expression of our national aspirations and pray to all the members assembled at the Yugoslav Club to persist in solidarity and unswervingly in the struggle for the vital rights of the Yugoslav homeland.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ivo Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study in Frontiermaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 309.

<sup>27</sup> AHAZU, JO (Trumbić) 124/24, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> AHAZU, JO (Trumbić) 124/24, \*”according to that declaration submitted in front of the Austrian Chamber, at its first session since the beginning of the war, the Yugoslav deputies demanded the creation of a free and independent State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes” p. 3.

This declaration issued by the South Slavic deputies to the Parliament in Vienna represented a very courageous step, inspired by the idea of self-determination, towards the establishment of an independent entity, while they were still part of the Habsburg Monarchy. It was not yet an open call for unification with Serbia, but it was bold enough to excite the Yugoslav nationalists.<sup>29</sup> The report describes the atmosphere of a very intensive pro-Yugoslav movement in March 1918 among the Slovenes, and in particular among the Slovene women who had collected thousands of signatures in support of the Declaration, and presented it in a solemn ceremony on March 23-24 in Ljubljana to Anton Korošec (1872-1940), a Slovenian politician, the leader of the Slovenian People's Party (SLS), and president of the Yugoslav Club in Vienna. Franja Tavčar (1868-1938), a Slovenian charitable worker and the future leader of the Circle of Yugoslav Sisters (from 1921), spoke in front of him, with nationalist fervor, and "a discourse that raised a storm of applause":

The Slovene woman, as well as the Yugoslav woman, has felt the harsh hand that chokes her people. That is how, in her heart, the irresistible wish was formed for national liberation and for the Yugoslav union. (...)

She has insisted that women cross the class lines to achieve this.

The signatures have come from all over, from remote frontiers of our homeland, from cities and villages of the whole country. The peasant women's mellow hand has signed it, as has the hand of the city dweller.

Along with several other examples taken from newspaper articles that indicated the agitated anti-German sentiments of the Slovenes, and of Slovene women in particular, who in the words of the *Marburger Zeitung* correspondent were capable, if provoked, to act like "real furies", this report was used to back the positions of the Yugoslav delegation.

## Yugoslav Women's Congress in Belgrade

One of the most frequent criticisms aimed against women's suffrage was the absence of an organized women's and/or feminist movement in South-eastern Europe. To counter this argument, the first Congress of Women of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was organized in Belgrade from September 21<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1919. The Congress was intended as a showcase of Yugoslav unification, and it gathered delegates of numerous associations in the country, as well as the most prominent women activists from different parts

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<sup>29</sup> Lederer, p. 25.

of the Kingdom. They were headed by the president of the Serbian National Women's Alliance, Danica Dim Hristić, who presided over the opening.<sup>30</sup> Although there were many women representatives of many societies, the Serbian impact was the most obvious: there were 10 women's societies that constituted the Serbian National Women's Alliance, with an additional 7 chapters. The Alliance hoped to be joined by participants from an additional 69 different societies from 39 cities of the new state. This inevitably led to difficulties in the decision-making process at the Congress from the first day. Even the name of the new organization proved to be a challenge, since the more traditional participants wanted to keep the official Kingdom of SHS in the title, whereas more radical, integrationalists insisted that the Yugoslav name should be used for the Alliance. This issue indicated there was a split in the organization along ideological lines from the very beginning of the new state. Still, the most important task was to merge the associations present at the Congress into a new one under the name "National Women's Alliance of the Kingdom of SHS".

Its predecessor was the "Serbian National Women's Alliance", an organization founded in 1904. Its mission was to advocate for women's rights and equality in the legal sphere. It demanded equality for women in regard to inheritance, education and suffrage in Serbia. World War I stalled its activities, and members of the Alliance, like most other organizations and individuals, had to relinquish all work except what was considered strictly of national interest. Therefore, in the novel circumstances following the unification, a restart of sorts was necessary. The Alliance was supposed to work in four sections, dealing with charitable, cultural, feminist and hygienic(!) activities. It presented a variety of activities at the Congress, some of which had little to do with suffrage or feminist issues in general.

The Congress took place at the time of huge tensions regarding the settlement of frontiers in Paris. The uneasy peace gave way to tensions and incidents in most areas that were under examination, but the most serious were those in the western border areas of the new state occupied by Italians, where they acted as if the Treaty of London had actually been implemented. A secret treaty of 1915 which promised the Italians many of the areas of Austria-Hungary (as well as, among other perks, a protectorate over Albania, and the Dodecanese archipelago) as a reward for entering the First World War. The Italians started to behave like absolute masters, harassing the Croat and

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<sup>30</sup> From Zagreb, there was Baroness Turković, Olga Peleš, Ženka Frangeš, Zofka Kveder; from Ljubljana, Marija Bajtova, M. Vesnjareva, Aneta Gogola; from Rijeka and Sušak, Vidović and Kaftanić; from Maribor, Mara Majsterova; from Trieste, Milčenić; from Sarajevo, Mara Samarčina; from Mostar, Zorka Ostojić. *Spomenica sa I kongresa Žena Kraljevstva Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, održanog u Beogradu 21, 22 i 23 septembra 1919.*, (Beograd: Nova štamparija "Davidović", 1920), p. 5.



Slovene population, introducing censorship, expelling Croat priests, banning the Glagolitic liturgy in favor of the Latin mass, and stirring mass protests of the locals. All of this was done with the full agreement of the government in Rome and presented a major obstacle for a diplomatic settlement at the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>31</sup>

Ever conscious of the developments in Paris, the leadership of the newly established Alliance did not overlook the immediate political challenges faced by the new state. In a most informative presentation, Mrs Vidović testified about the occupation by the Italians of the city of Rijeka on the Croatian Littoral that had occurred some ten days earlier, and severe breaches of human rights in the city itself, as well as in Istria. Schools were closed and teachers expelled, as were priests and administrators. The Italian army was notorious for harassing the women of Rijeka along national lines. Another participant, Mrs Paja Kaftanićeva, the secretary of the Democratic Union of Women from Sušak, read the letter that was signed by thousands of women, in protest about such aggressive practice. In the debate that ensued, several participants suggested an active response to the crisis. Olga Krmač-Peješ from Zagreb suggested that a deputation of women should be formed, and they should take this protest letter to the Paris Peace Conference. Delfa Ivanić, a veteran of the women's movement in Serbia, noted that it was very dangerous to collect so many signatures for that protest letter, and thought at least a telegram should be sent to the Paris Peace Conference and to President Wilson. ("That has already been done", said a voice from the audience.)<sup>32</sup>

Back in Zagreb, Zofka Kveder Demetrović was impressed by the organization of the Congress, but even more so by the diversity of participants that met in Belgrade on September 20, 1919:

(...) – it was very strenuous, because very diverse elements and temperaments were represented, women from all regions of our beautiful and unified homeland (...) there were women of all walks of life and of different ages. From an honorable matron in national costume, to a young lady in the latest outfit from Paris. From a peasant woman to a university student and professor. Women from all the political parties. Next to an old fanatical Serbian Radical, I saw a young and fierce Communist, next to a tolerant Yugoslav there was a separatist, a former supporter of Starčević's party. And still all these somehow settled, understood each other and came together.

<sup>31</sup> Lederer, p. 165.

<sup>32</sup> *Spomenica*, 1920, pp. 13-19.

Zofka Kveder Demetrović left the Congress with the strong conviction that it was “a manifestation of women’s maturity for parliamentary life. Women told many real stories about their work, they collected many serious resolutions and suggestions, and there were many excellent and fabulous speakers”.<sup>33</sup>

While discussing women’s issues and demands, the Congress did not forget the geopolitics of the moment. It was acting in accordance with the age, fully mindful of the frontier-making that was simultaneously going on in Paris. At the urging of the delegation of the Charitable Women’s Cooperative from Pančevo, the Congress issued an appeal to the National Assembly of the Kingdom of SHS in which, relying on President Wilson’s principle of self-determination, it demanded the National Assembly to counter the Paris Peace Conference’s “unjust” demand that “the Serbs leave Temišoara (the main city in the Banat) to the Romanians.” The delegates regarded it as

a huge mistake of the Peace Conference. We feel cheated, we do not want to suffer under anybody’s rule, we want freedom, we want to be Serbs in Serbia, and never Serbs in Romania (...) Romanians captured the Serbian territories across the line of demarcation. Are we now what we used to be before, Serbs under the Turks? Are we going to regain our precious Banat? We expect nothing less, and we cannot believe that the Peace Conference is treating us like stepchildren. We protest against it most energetically, and demand that the whole of the Banat be exclusively the Serbian Banat.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The developments of 1919 in many ways showed the women’s movement in its purest form in comparison with the later transitions. Women were fighting for the tangible reform of suffrage rights, which Austria-Hungary had denied them and which many Habsburg successor states accepted as democratic reform, thereby providing women with a place at the table of political representation. Women like Zofka Kveder were enthusiastic supporters of Yugoslav unification, itself an ideological entrance card at the time, but failed to garner wider support on the issue. Unlike in the 1990s, when suffrage was a matter of abandoning the Communist monopoly in the electoral process and not a pure women’s issue, or in 1945, when all changes and reforms were

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<sup>33</sup> Zofka Kveder Demetrović, “Dojmovi sa kongresa jugoslavenskih žena u Beogradu”, *Jugoslavenska žena*, III, nos. 8-10, December 1, 1919, pp. 293-94.

<sup>34</sup> *Spomenica*, pp. 136-137.

filtered by the Communist dictatorship, in 1919 the cause was clear and was clearly a women's cause, and the means tangible and real. Yet, the new Yugoslav state, which was conceived in inequality, behaved consistently on the issue of suffrage, denying equality to women, too. We can conclude that in 1919 the concept of citizenship was maintained in the case of the "triune nation of Serbs-Croats-Slovenes", but even then there were variations in practice, to the exclusion of many minorities (Jews, Hungarians, Germans, Albanians, Roma) and, as we have seen, all women. The newly established state institutions and documents ignored women, their issues, and gender equality in equal measure as they (notoriously) ignored national and confessional equality in a state noted for national and religious pluralism. The women themselves, particularly after the issue of suffrage equality had been lost, fought for their rights in various marginal parties, mainly on the Left, but also as part of a (dis)united women's movement. But even here, the Communist Party (KPJ) being a good example, women were poorly represented in the leadership. As late as 1940, at the Fifth Land Conference of the KPJ, of the 101 delegates only 8 were women, and of that number only two had high party functions: Spasenija Cana Babović (organizational secretary for Serbia) and Vida Tomšič (member of the Slovenian CC). These two were the only women elected by the Fifth Land Conference into the KPJ CC, a body that had 30 members and 16 candidate members.

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