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Expert Designs or Fragile Understanding? The Competence of American Diplomacy and Influence in the Creation of the First Yugoslav State

Abstract

This paper analyzes the extent of American involvement in the creation of Yugoslavia and, more importantly, answers the question of whether the attempt of American statesmen at the creation of a united South-Slav state following the conclusion of the Great War was well-executed and based on thorough research and planning, or if it was engaged with a series of swift and rash decisions based in incompetence and a lack of adequate information of the region, its people, and its politics. I will include an analysis of the circumstances of the Western Balkans just prior to and during the occurrence of the Great War; and, more relevantly, the ideological and strategic reasons for which the United States engaged itself in the creation of the First Yugoslavia, as examining both are necessary in analyzing how these motivations demonstrated either the thoughtfulness or neglect of the American policymakers involved. I conclude that American involvement in the creation of Yugoslavia, while lacking complete thoroughness, was in many places significantly well-informed, though it did allow for the incorporation of paradoxes and weaknesses into the new state that would prove fatal in the long-term existence of the country.

Keywords:

Yugoslavia, United States, formation, Peace Conference, Wilson, creation, Serbia, inquiry

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INTRODUCTION/RESEARCH QUESTION

Larry Wolff, in his 2020 book, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, opens with the affirmation that “it would be difficult to overestimate either the enthusiasm for Woodrow Wilson in Eastern Europe during and after World War I or his huge impact on the political transformation embodied in the peace settlement at Versailles, which gave Eastern Europe its twentieth-century form on the map as a system of interlocking national states.”¹ Indeed, Wilson’s famous *Fourteen Points* indicates a clear concern with the maintenance of a new and peaceful post-war world, in which the Balkans are not neglected. Countries such as Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro are mentioned directly (Point Nine), and, in President Wilson’s own words, “the relations of the several Balkan states to one another [should be] determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.”²

In the closing sentences of his speech, Wilson remarked on the importance of justice, liberty, and safety to and between all peoples, regardless of their strength: “unless this principle be made its foundation [of his new order],” he states, “no part of the structure of international justice can stand.”³ In addition to Wilson, of course, there was a plethora of other American academics and experts, many specializing in, and concerned about, their own parts of Europe, eager to share with Wilson and his staff their knowledge of various European territories and their recommendations for the new European order. These policymakers and experts, however, also had other, more-strategic goals in mind when formulating their reports and conducting their research, as well.⁴

Such experts – one-hundred fifty of whom were grouped under the frequently-cited initiative called “The Inquiry,” organized by Dean Sidney Menzes of City College at the request of the president in 1917 – were composed significantly by professors, cartographers, geographers, historians,

¹ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2020, p. 1.

² Woodrow Wilson, *Fourteen Points*, from Arthur S. Link et al., Eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45 (1984), 536, 2009, Available from: https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~wggray/Teaching/His300/Handouts/Fourteen_Points.pdf, (Accessed April 28, 2023), pp. 1–2.

³ Woodrow Wilson, *Fourteen Points*, op. cit., p. 2.

⁴ Uroš Lipušček, “The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919,” *125 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between the USA and Serbia*, 2008, pp. 53–70.

and so forth.⁵ Such efforts as the Inquiry, led by Archibald Cary Coolidge, were supposed to fill the gaps in the president's knowledge of the European continent. As far as the Western Balkans were concerned, for example, "the Inquiry supplied over a thousand maps, and the geographer Isaiah Bowman played a leading role on Wilson's team at the peace conference," including, for instance, by providing "...a map to prepare him to address the conflicting claims of the Italians and the Yugoslavs..."⁶ This is merely just one example, of more to be explored later, of the extent of research and study that went into Wilson's peace initiative.

However, despite these measures, and the extent to which American diplomats did have genuine interest in ensuring the stability of Europe and the world after the Peace, there were many aspects of America's involvement in South-Eastern Europe that were, at best, rushed, and, at worst, horribly misguided and underinformed. Thus, the question should be asked: was the attempt of American statesmen at the creation of a united South-Slav state following the conclusion of the Great War well-executed and based on thorough research and planning, or was it engaged with a series of swift and rash decisions based in incompetence and a lack of adequate information of the region, its people, and its politics, or perhaps something between the two? It can be stated that American involvement in the creation of Yugoslavia, while lacking complete thoroughness, was in many places significantly well-informed, though it did allow for the incorporation of paradoxes and weaknesses into the new state that would prove fatal in the long-term existence of the country.

INITIAL CHALLENGES AND BROAD COMPLEXITIES

"In 1917, Southern Slav representatives from Austria-Hungary — including Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, and representatives of the Serbian state that had already been founded in 1835 — met on the Greek island of Corfu. Together they agreed to announce the founding of a common state."⁷ This "Declaration of Corfu," in calling for unification of Southern Slavs, stated that "the names, symbols and religions of the Orthodox Serbs and the Catholic Slovenes and

⁵ Uroš Lipušček, "The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919", op. cit.

⁶ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., p. 237.

⁷ Nenad Kreizer, *Yugoslavia, 1918: Birth of a dead state*, Deutsche Welle, Bonn, Germany, 2018, Available from: <https://www.dw.com/en/yugoslavia-1918-birth-of-a-dead-state/a-46538595>, (Accessed 28 April, 2023).

Croats should be recognized as equal..." Regardless of the difficulties and complexities of ensuring that this promise could actually be implemented effectively, there was evidently a desire for the creation of a Southern-Slav state, one that was shared by those from across the important ethnic groups that would later be included in the new country (in the case of Bosnia, for instance, "the strongest advocates of both revolutionary terrorism and romantic, ill-defined Yugoslavism came...from Bosnia-Hercegovina."⁸).

The United States was not entirely unaware of this. Although communication between the US and Serbia was relatively slight when compared to that between more-relevant players as it related to America's immediate foreign concerns, diplomatic relations between America and Serbia were essentially underway by 1879.⁹ This does not change the fact, however, that American politicians, even through the First World War, were severely underinformed about the circumstances existing in the Western Balkans at the time.

It was not as if the United States barged into South-Eastern Europe in 1919 and restructured boundaries on zero basis, however. As illustrated, there was significant desire among the peoples of the Western Balkans for the formation of a South-Slav state. John R. Lampe, author of *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)* – and others – demonstrates this very well. The Balkan territories – isolated and fragmented geographically, yet unprotected from foreign invasion – were nonetheless fairly docile in that their various religious and cultural groups were not, in fact, constantly engaged in ethnic-based conflict, as one may assume would have been the case given the disastrous events during the collapse of Yugoslavia.¹⁰

Instead, even by the time of the modern era, conflict on purely-ethnic grounds was rare. For instance, in the late 1700s, "Serbs and Croats lived peaceably without religious antagonism in neighboring hamlets, if not the same ones, and served together without incident in the same regiments,"¹¹ on the Hapsburg Military Border (in modern-day Croatia). Increases in industry

⁸ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

⁹ Dragoljub Živojinović, "The Establishment of Diplomatic and Commercial Relations between the United States of America and Serbia, 1878–1881", *125 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between the USA and Serbia*, 2008, pp. 17–36 (Also mention religious freedom of Serbian constitution somewhere, maybe).

¹⁰ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit.; Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History*, Modern Library Paperback Edition, United States, 2000.

¹¹ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., p. 31.

and commerce after 1900, as well as improving education, not to mention rising population, far from fanning ethnic conflict, actually implied economic benefits that had not existed in prior times that could accommodate a more-modern, unified state (though economic activity was still only moderately increasing). Farmers and peasants, who composed some four-fifths of the population of future Yugoslavia, were perhaps the least divided. In other words, recent conflicts cannot be explained by age-old rivalries.

However, that is not to say that there were not reasons for suspicion of the successfulness of a Southern-Slav state. Tensions between ethnic groups in Bosnia, for example, were on the rise in the late 1880s, and despite the increasing connectedness that came with the modernizing world, the Balkan lands still lacked significant inter-Balkan trade, which posed a potential threat to unity. Tensions were also heightened between the various ethnicities of the Balkans due to growing political involvement, and thus increasing political polarization. The Assimilation of Balkan lands by greater powers, particularly Austria-Hungary, was another significant factor in creating division, as assimilation was often done poorly, and its benefits were rarely distributed considerately or fairly. Nevertheless, a sort of Yugoslav nationalism was present as early as the 1860s in Dalmatia, particularly in light of Croat-Slovene unity in hostility to Italian nationalism along the coast of the Adriatic. However, as Lampe notes, “only the course of the First World War...made it possible to form the first Yugoslav state in December of 1918.”¹²

Prior to this, however, how aware was the US about the complicated circumstances of the Western Balkans? Furthermore, with hindsight, given the events of the 1990s, one must also wonder if US efforts to create a Yugoslav state were misguided or futile in the first place – this is not a debate, however, on whether the existence of a lasting Yugoslavia, given different circumstances, would or would not have been possible. But, in fact, far from pushing against cries and warning signs to create a united Southern-Slav state, much of the evidence at the time actually painted a very-favorable picture to the idea of what would become Yugoslavia.

By 1918, the majority of opinion in regard to the future Yugoslavia (save in Kosovo) was in favor. The Serbian military, though it suffered heavily, survived the war, which would prove vital in making the creation of Yugoslavia a possibility, physically speaking. “By the middle of 1915, both the Serbian government and a newly-formed Yugoslav Committee of Croatian and Slovenian exiles had proclaimed war aims that would overturn the pre-1914 order and create some sort of South-Slav state,”¹³ Lampe notes.

¹² John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., p. 71.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

The Yugoslav Committee, though essentially in exile in London during the war, would embody many of the desires of Balkans peoples in regard to what much of the population wanted the future Yugoslavia to look like. Essentially, the project of the creation of Yugoslavia politically, though there was existing opposition to it, was already in the works prior to the US even joining the war – interestingly, the Corfu Declaration of 1917 even had fourteen points, although this was purely coincidental, as it was created before Wilson’s *Fourteen Points* had been spoken.¹⁴ Finally, cruel treatment under Hapsburg rule also made Yugoslavia seem like a better alternative to many individuals.

Given the confusion and the sudden and rapid scramble of the United States to gather information on the Western Balkans, it comes as no surprise that political figures in Washington were at first very clumsy concerning how their information was acquired. For starters, it did not help matters that US knowledge of Serbia, and the Balkans in general, was not only very narrow, but also largely informed by Austrian sources.¹⁵ Furthermore, while the propaganda of other ethnic groups, such as the Poles and Czechs, had access to the ears of politicians that mattered, Yugoslav propaganda was notably absent. In fact, within the US, the only American Serb with solid influence and reputation was pro-Yugoslav and pro-monarchist Mihajlo Pupin, “honorary Serbian consul in New York, as well as one of the most respected professors at Columbia University.”¹⁶ Pupin even mediated with American leaders at Versailles, representing the delegation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS), especially as borders were concerned.

Yet, due to the overall slim amount of actual Balkan (in this case, Serb) diplomats in contact with American statesmen, the result was often that important political decisions regarding the future of the region – decisions that were to shape millions of lives for decades to come – were handled on the basis of the little bits information that were be presented by a few individuals, and they could often be very biased. In addition, the foreign diplomats that politicians in America had at their disposal were prone to fluctuation.

This was seen through actions of Nikola Pašić, the Serbian prime minister during the Great War, who would later become the future prime minister of Yugoslavia. It can be presumed that Yugoslav ambitions would have been fulfilled more accurately and more completely, had not Pašić, a royalist who was in favor of a united, centrally-governed Yugoslavia, replaced the diplomat to Washington, Ljubomir Mihajlović, last-minute. This was done

¹⁴ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁵ Uroš Lipušček, “The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919”, op. cit.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

after August, 1918, due to Mihajlović's disrespect of Pašić's wishes as prime minister, yet the former's replacement left Serbia without any diplomats in Washington who had any real experience just before the conclusion of the war, when they arguably needed one most. An underlying reason for this alteration was because Ljubomir Mihajlović was an increasing sympathizer of Ante Trumbić, president of the Yugoslav Committee, which was quite enthusiastic about establishing a republic organized as a federal state, contrary to a monarchy.¹⁷ Interestingly, Pašić's decision to replace Mihajlović placed him in the same position as some Italian officials, who were also attempting to delegitimize the Yugoslav Committee, though in this instance with the goal of rendering the dream of a united South-Slav state illusory entirely. It would appear, therefore, that the internal politics of the Balkans were simply not conveyed well through their limited and ununified number of diplomats in Washington: the canvas of political issues being painted for American statesmen was simply not manned by enough individuals to represent all of the political changes and diverse viewpoints relevant in South-Eastern Europe.

The United States was not entirely ignorant of this fact, however. For instance, the Wilson administration was quite aware of, and even concerned about, the consequences of the disunity between the Yugoslav Committee and Pašić and the other royalists; though, they did not go as far as involving themselves in the dispute. The internal and foreign disagreements over the operations, views, and legitimacy of the Yugoslav Committee, thus, ensured that the United States would not take its representation of the Southern Slavs seriously, according to Lipušček, instead giving more legitimacy to Pašić and the royalist vision of a Yugoslavia that existed as a centralized state.¹⁸ The difficult position of the United States towards the future Yugoslavia was even implied in written form by Secretary of State Robert Lansing to Wilson, in which he stated that "...the jealousy of Italy and the desire of Serbia to absorb the Yugoslavs rather than to become federated with them makes it necessary to become cautious in deciding on a policy."¹⁹ This "policy" referred to that towards Poland and the Czechs and Slovaks, the nationalist organizations of whom the United States was hesitant to recognize when compared to the other Entente powers, largely in anticipation that the Yugoslavs would then demand recognition, which of course Italy was opposed to, and Serbia wanted a greater role in.

¹⁷ Uroš Lipušček, "The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919", *op. cit.*, pp. 64–65.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Challenges to diplomacy aside, however, there were certainly competent individuals within the US government who engaged in understanding, and even proposed solutions to, the historical and contemporary problems facing the Balkans as it pertained to the creation of a South-Slav state. Lipušček outlines one of them very well: Albert H. Putney.

Putney was then head of the Near-East Department, and before long, Lansing ordered him to investigate the national difficulties acting against Austria-Hungary. "Putney was in all actuality, the first higher functionary in the State Department to take interest in the 'Slavs' problem,"²⁰ according to Lipušček. In May, 1917, he had composed a memorandum, entitled, "Nationalistic Aspirations in the Near East," that dealt with many of the problems facing the South Slavs. Later revised, he proposed three potential solutions (the third one being his favorite), broadly defined as a union of Yugoslavs in an Austro-Hungarian-type political arrangement; the existence of borders as they then stood, with the expectation that "Austria-Hungary establish a liberal system of government;"²¹ or a united Yugoslavia, composed of Serbs, as well as others of the then-Hapsburg lands, such as the Croats – although, he was largely opposed to the admission of the Slovenes into this united state due to perceived historical and linguistic differences.

Putney was, relatively speaking, quite capable in terms of his knowledge of, and his action on, the situations facing the South-Slavs, enough to even pose solutions to the dilemmas facing them with confidence. However, in spite of Putney, and people like him, who did exist to some degree in meager capacity, there are unfortunately accounts of their concerns and insights being overlooked, as the foreign interests and goals of America's politicians wavered and shifted over time. One of the most-prominent examples of this was the question of what was to become of Austria-Hungary.

Putney, for instance, read into the problems that would continue to occur should sizeable ethnic minorities exist under large empires such as that of Austria-Hungary without adequate representation – something Wilson took painfully long to respond to in practice. He wrote that "any peace which will leave the Jugo-Slavs partially residing in free states and partially under the Austrian and Hungarian despotism will mean a continuance of that strained condition in the Northern Balkans which for so many years has contained within itself the germ of the present war."²² However, Putney's written concerns – and recommend solutions – largely fell on deaf ears, as President Wilson at that time was still operating on the assumption that Austria-

²⁰ Uroš Lipušček, "The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919", *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 57–58.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 58.

Hungary would remain intact, even if threatened by domestic differences and internal divisions. Furthermore, as Lipušček illustrates, “it does well to bear in mind that there was a great general opinion that Austria-Hungary would survive the war, although in a diminished capacity.”²³

According to Wolff, Wilson first approved a statement that an independent ethnic people were at war with Austro-Hungary “itself” in September, 1918, when a statement of his regarding the Czechs and the Slovaks was made public. In hindsight, this assertion probably came shockingly late, given the ultimate fate of the empire. However, Wolff also notes that, “if the Habsburg monarchy was already ‘doomed and dissolving,’ it would be Wilson who pronounced the word that would consummate that doom and dissolution by calling forth a new world, a new society of nations to displace the empire of nationalities.”²⁴ Wolff states that the aforementioned “recognition of the Czecho-Slovak Council [as a belligerent government] on September 3 certainly offered such service, and finally pointed toward an American policy dedicated to the disappearance of the Habsburg monarchy.”²⁵

Wilson’s idea of peace, after all, did seek to ensure that ethnic minorities were not unrepresented by larger, overburdening empires. “The establishment of the new states of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia on the postwar map of Europe,” notes Wolff, “is closely associated with Wilson’s principle of self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference, which also vindicated the dissection of the Habsburg monarchy into national components.”²⁶ It should also be noted, however, that the decision to cultivate national feelings among those of Austria-Hungary was also intended to pressure the country into breaking from Germany, thus being as strategic as it was ideological.²⁷

Regardless, the empire was doomed. As noted by Lipušček, the highly-influential Inquiry (which was less enthusiastic about dividing Austria and Hungary as the State Department was), “began to conclude that the days of the Habsburg monarchy were numbered.”²⁸ As illustrated by Wolff, due to many circumstances, the evolution of events ensured that “Wilson himself shed every possible sympathy for Habsburg Austria-Hungary and led the

²³ Uroš Lipušček, “The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919”, op. cit., p. 59.

²⁴ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., p. 89.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

²⁶ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁷ Allen Lynch, “Woodrow Wilson and the principle of national self-determination”, *Review of International Studies*, 2002, pp. 419–436, p. 430.

²⁸ Uroš Lipušček, “The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919”, op. cit., p. 59.

peacemakers in Paris to embrace the demolition of the multinational Habsburg monarchy and its supplantation by supposedly national successor states, including Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia."²⁹

This wavering of political goals was not helped by the fact that US knowledge of the Balkans, was, as mentioned, quite narrow to begin with. However, the conditions of the Great War prevented a return to the former Balkans layout, with Austria-Hungary dissolving and Italy somewhat tamed, or at least weakened.³⁰ Wilson, as well, had fully accepted the dissolution of Austria-Hungary not too long after the end of the war, a dissolution which the formation of Yugoslavia was to secure. Yet, Lipušček goes as far as to state that "the State Department only began to closely examine the dilemmas surrounding the Balkans and Austria-Hungary when the question of the future of the Austro-Hungarian empire and its constituent nations arose. It is clear from the majority of documentation on the subject that Serbia was regarded mainly in the light of the dissolving monarchy and the arising Yugoslav question."³¹

The distinctly disinterested approach of American statesmen to the fate of Austria-Hungary is well-stated by Lampe, who said that "...Anglo-American diplomacy accepted rather than promoted the monarchy's disintegration,"³² a statement that demonstrates the degree to which American politicians did, at least prior to the peacemaking process, largely overlook the factors essential to comprehend for the creation of a sound Yugoslav state. However, it should still be noted that America was the first of the Great Powers to recognize the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The New Yugoslav state was not recognized at beginning of the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, but by February, it had been recognized by the United States. Only following the German delegation's recognition of the state three months later would Britain and France similarly recognize it, something which does represent a significant new devotion of American attention to the Yugoslav movement.³³

Another personification of America's confidence in the abilities (or perhaps concerns about the weaknesses) of the new country was the Blair loan of 1923, which promised to raise \$100,000,000 for railroad construction

²⁹ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., p. 58.

³⁰ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., p. 101.

³¹ Uroš Lipušček, "The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919", op. cit., p. 56.

³² John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., p. 110.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

from Zagreb and other inland areas to the coast of the Adriatic Sea. However, once again to illustrate the lack of decidedness of American foreign policy – much of which, one could argue, was influenced by domestic conflicts in the political ring – the Blair loan ended up being largely a false promise to Yugoslavia, with only a small portion of the total sum ever being provided. Thus, regarding Yugoslavia, as with the rest of the world, the US later moved itself into the position of one taking on a far more-distant role in the conditions and matters of Europe, the US Senate never even so much as ratifying the Treaty of Versailles.



Figure 1 Article announcing the Blair loan in *The New York Times* newspaper, March 30, 1925.³⁴

In essence, while America did indeed possess individuals competent on the subjects and peoples of the Western Balkans, the actual extent to which the suggestions and the recommendations of these individuals were heeded, and the degree to which the United States' political interest in them was firm, was, unfortunately, greatly hindered by the seeming uncertainty in the decisions of American statesmen to support particular nationalistic or

³⁴ "Yugoslavia Near Loan," *The New York Times*, 1925, Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/1925/03/30/archives/yugoslavia-near-loan-blair-arranging-100000000-americanenglish.html>, (Accessed 28, April, 2023).

statehood movements. There can be little doubt, however, that while the degree to which America set itself on a definite, unwavering course of action from the very beginning can be called into question, the goals in reorganizing a post-war Europe – broadly defined as enhancing the liberalization of the continent and providing for the self-determination of sizeable ethnic groups – were sought by many, particularly Wilson, from relatively early on.

IDEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Thinking back to Wilson's *Fourteen Points*, its central pillars were of justice and self-determination, all part of still a greater effort to maintain peace. This is demonstrated repeatedly throughout his speech, including in the desire that Russia should be dealt with leniency, and that Germany should be forgiven and included in the post-war order. Thus, it should come as no surprise that, as far as America was concerned for the Balkan states, while "the Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty" (Point Twelve), other national groups under the control of the Turks "should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of an autonomous development."³⁵

Woodrow Wilson was, after all, an academic at heart (and the first and so far only American president to ever hold a PhD). His academic mindset and idealism stood starkly and stubbornly opposed to the imperialistic old-world order, at least as far as his foreign policy was largely concerned. Indeed, it is no secret that his correlation of nationality with sovereignty, and the other progressive ideals his foreign policy embodied, has earned itself its own name, Wilsonianism, as a leadership style. It is no mistake, therefore, to focus so much on Wilson, as well as his signature stubbornness, when examining America's role in the Peace in general, as it was, to a large extent, his idealism which brought America into such direct involvement with the political matters of the obscure European countries such as those of the Balkans, and made quite a significant impact on the post-war order as a whole.

However, the president was not without his faults. Indeed, his own repressive actions and opinions concerning people of color within the US domestically is nothing less than horridly hypocritical. His foreign policy, as well, though ideal in intention, was often similarly ironic or hypocritical in execution. According to Lampe, for instance, "if the principle of ethnic self-determination introduced by US President Woodrow Wilson justified the dissolution of the multi-ethnic Hapsburg monarchy, how could it accommodate another one in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, as

³⁵ Woodrow Wilson, *Fourteen Points*, op. cit., p. 2.

the first Yugoslavia was christened?"³⁶ Indeed, the empires of Germany and that of the Ottomans were multi-ethnic, as well, and the creation of the multi-ethnic states, not only that of the first Yugoslavia, but also of Czechoslovakia, seemed to promote a version of what Wilson sought precisely to dissolve. This overlooked paradox would, interestingly, spell tremendous difficulty for the future Yugoslavia. Yet, "any nation-state, it was assumed before 1914," Lampe notes, "had the potential to assimilate smaller ethnic groups, not by force but by the attraction of the successful European-style modernization that was supposed to follow from political unification."³⁷ Thus, despite its hypocritical nature, the assimilation of ethnic groups was not new, even as Wilson actively disintegrated other multi-ethnic states in creating the new ones.

While such ironic thinking may not necessarily have led to the outright failure of the country – and, indeed, may have seemed of little consequence at the time – unfortunately, it was far from Wilson's only questionable trait. Wilson's personal feelings and sympathies, for instance, were prone to being influenced and affected by others to an alarming degree: the queen of Romania's being late for lunch with the president genuinely damaged Wilson's sympathy for her country,³⁸ while a pair of socks knitted for him by a Serb woman supposedly moved him strongly to complete the "knitting together" of the new Yugoslavia.³⁹ This potential flaw in character, thus, extended to the president's decisions regarding the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. For example, Colonel Edward M. House, arguably Wilson's most-trusted advisor – and an extremely-effective fix-it-all – who was of constant influence on Wilson's decision making regarding the status and restructuring of Europe, as well as many other matters, was clearly more occupied with Italian sympathies than that of the Yugoslavs – he himself authorized the Italians to occupy the land that was guaranteed to Italy under the secret London Pact of 1915, against the wishes of the latter.⁴⁰ The American delegation and Wilson's additional friends, furthermore, were in fact often divided in opinion – notably between those who harbored Italian sympathies and those who harbored Yugoslav sympathies, the former of these being the

³⁶ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³⁸ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., pp. 141–143.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 143–144.

⁴⁰ Uroš Lipušček, "The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919", op. cit., p. 67.

larger one. Such individuals had a significant personal influence on Wilson's own opinions.

Nevertheless, the degree to which he could be influenced did have its limitations. In the end, the state of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was ultimately protected by Wilson – though this largely had to do with his distain for the stubbornness and expansionist dreams of Italy (which can frankly be considered a personal reaction of Wilson in its own right). Indeed, despite the opposition of the Italians, and the disunity among the Southern-Slavs – made particularly visible from politicians in Croatia and Montenegro, notably King Nikola I Petrović-Njegoš, who wished for his Montenegro to remain independent⁴¹ – Wilson, while no doubt still unsure about the success that the new state would have, ensured that “the US was the first of the large powers that recognized the new state.”⁴²

Despite his stubbornness, however, Wilson, gradually but undeniably, began to concede more and more to the old, traditional European ambitions that his idealism usually placed him in stark opposition to. In fact, according to contemporary sources, though Wilson “was capable of digging his toes in,”⁴³ his slowness often meant that he failed to realize and take advantage of the opportunities to do so until it was too late. Of course, Wilson was, understandably, cautious in his disagreements with the other Great Powers, seeing as he hoped that his grand project – the creation of the League of Nations – would, in fact, be seen through, and this can likely explain many of the instances in which he conceded his plans of continental redesign to European influence.

However, it would be difficult to overlook the degree to which Wilson, in his action at the Peace Conference, worked for the creation of ethnic states, founded on principles of minority representation and ethnic self-determination. Such was the thinking that convinced him of the necessity of the birth of the First Yugoslavia. And yet, even despite these grand aims, there was a notable additional layer of strategic political and economic concerns that were important in America's involvement in the formation of the new state.

⁴¹ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., pp. 134–139, 143.

⁴² Uroš Lipušček, “The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919”, op. cit., p. 68.

⁴³ John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Macmillan and Co, London, 1920, pp. 39–41.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

The Balkans, it should be noted, were never at the top of America's radar. Despite the expansionist policy of Theodore Roosevelt, "...the Balkans remained an aptly named 'dead hand' to the American sphere until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914."⁴⁴ Indeed, of those Americans who were in any way familiar with the far-off Balkan regions, there can be little doubt that they were viewed with the most-minuscule degrees of importance, if they were even paid attention to at all. But with the Great War and, later, the Peace Conference, attention was eventually drawn to the Balkan peoples, and the geopolitical potential that their reorganization held.

Perhaps the greatest foreseer of the potential of the Balkans to provide for decent political conditions was the aforementioned Putney, who, having composed the memorandum ordered by Lansing, was expressly of the opinion that the creation of a Yugoslav state would have the potential to eliminate Balkans tensions that, otherwise, could remain "...a constant potential cause of a new gigantic war..."⁴⁵ This was in a world, it should be noted, that had just emerged from a reeling conflict, half a decade that claimed tens of millions of total civilian and military lives across Africa, Asia, and, most-directly, Europe.⁴⁶ The threat that the "powder keg of Europe," as the Balkans were once known (quite accurately, as history had showed), would erupt again was no doubt at the back of the minds of most politicians. Putney and many of his contemporaries were no exception.

In addition to this, however, Putney thought, as did other American statesmen, that establishing the Southern-Slavs in their own state had the potential to be conducive to the prevention of German Southward expansionist ambitions. The Inquiry, in fact, hoped that, with Italy, which also acted as an obstacle, the two countries – Yugoslavia and Italy – would serve as friends to one another in opposition to Austria, as well. Of course, this did not end up happening – they would rather become starkly suspicious of one another due to their territorial contestations – yet the existence of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes itself served, in the eyes of many

⁴⁴ Uroš Lipušček, "The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919", op. cit., p. 53.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.), *World War I 1914–1918*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Chicago, Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/discover/World-War-I#:~:text=Combat%20and%20disease%20claimed%20the,%2C%20military%20action%2C%20and%20massacres>, (Accessed 18 April 2023).

experts at the time, to dissuade further imperialistic advances from central Europe.⁴⁷

However, not all strategic considerations placed the nationalistic aspirations of statehood of the Southern-Slavs in the advantaged position as far as the US government was concerned.⁴⁸ Indeed, tensions did exist between matters of strategy and necessity and those of ideology.⁴⁹ Wilson, for one, ceded Brenner Pass, of the Tyrol, to Italy (although he afterward insisted on only pursuing a policy of organizing countries on ethnic rather than strategic considerations).⁵⁰ Furthermore, foreign concerns were often not of any major consequence to American statesmen at all, as paying off debt largely preoccupied the Allies, including the US, following the war. Nevertheless, there were strategic considerations which were investigated diligently that often aligned well with Wilson's idealistic policies (such as that with Austria Hungary, for instance⁵¹) – to say otherwise would be to imply that the idealism of American foreign diplomacy during the time of Wilson and the strategic reorganization of Europe following the conclusion of the Great War were polar opposites. Although House allowed Italy to occupy the territory it was promised in the Treaty of London, and although Italy desired the Dalmatian Islands from the Slavs, many worried that, should Italy, in its imperialistic ambitions, acquire the land successfully, it could have the result of upsetting the Slavic peoples and driving them towards pan-Slavic Bolshevik ideologies.⁵² Incidentally, the strategic thinking that necessitated, in America's eyes, the provision of Dalmatia (save, in the end, Zadar⁵³) to the Slavs lined up well with Wilson's idealistic ambitions for a united Southern-Slav state that did not exclude large groups of ethnic Slavs to other countries.

⁴⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.), *World War I 1914–1918*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Chicago.

⁴⁸ Allen Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson and the principle of national self-determination", op. cit., p. 427.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, pp. 425–426.

⁵⁰ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., pp. 113–114.

⁵¹ Allen Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson and the principle of national self-determination", op. cit., p. 431. What is illustrated here is that the backing of Yugoslav and Czecho-Slovak nationalistic movements were largely strategical, in that it secured the dissolution of Austria-Hungary. Yet, this also benefited the Czecho-Slovaks and the Yugoslavs.

⁵² Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., p. 153.

⁵³ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit., p. 114.

As far as the Italians were concerned, it was strategically beneficial for them to support the continued independence of Montenegro in order to oppose Serbia and the Southern Slavs, effectively weakening the latter (thus strengthening their claim to Dalmatia). However, that would weaken the Yugoslav state as a whole, which, given the strategic reasons for its formation by American diplomats, could have disastrous consequences on a global scale. Thus, even despite Wilson's personal reassurances to King Nikola of Montenegro, the state was ultimately combined with the greater Southern-Slav state.⁵⁴

This illustrates the notable concern that, as expressed by Wilson (citing Pupin), "if the Yugoslavs have the impression that they have not been treated justly, they will throw themselves on the side of the Slavic world against the Western world."⁵⁵ Wilson, and others, sought to be extremely cautious concerning the potential development of a hostile Eastern-European realm – particularly, as noted, one that could turn to Bolshevism. This required very delicate acts on behalf of American diplomats, such as the strenuous balancing of Italian and Yugoslav desires. Indeed, Wilson himself was, ultimately, quite favorable (one may even say biased) towards the Slavic side (he hated the Treaty of London, and secret treaties in general⁵⁶), and even despite Italy's accurate conviction of this preference of Wilson's, he and others nevertheless continued to push for a unified Yugoslav state, largely because of its strategic, in addition to ideological, merit as a country.

CONCLUSION

One can see from this analysis that the United States, its leadership, and its diplomats, were in several cases extremely skilled and capable in the implementation of their well-researched policy decisions. However, in other instances, rival views clashed, political missteps were made, gaps in knowledge were persistent, personal sympathies were affected or appealed to, and idealism occasionally contrasted with strategic reasoning. One cannot argue that the US was entirely and completely informed on the circumstances of the Western Balkans prior to their involvement in the creation of the first Yugoslavia. In fact, there were many gaps in their research, and there were many political considerations that should have been taken seriously into account by American statesmen that were ultimately overlooked. However, it would be similarly baseless to argue that the US did not possess a significant

⁵⁴ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., p. 143.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 40, 45.

– and at many times, skillful – hand in the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

According to Lipušček, the creation of the first Yugoslavia “would have been almost impossible” without the aid of the United States.⁵⁷ The United States recognized the state of Southern Slavs when no other Great Power would, and it ultimately defended the lands of Dalmatia and the Adriatic coast against the imperial advances of Italy, shaping the course of events in South-Eastern Europe for decades to come, for better or worse. Wolff states, “the map of Eastern Europe today still reflects Wilson’s problematic preoccupation with delineating an interlocking complex of national states, and its origins can be traced in the intellectual history of Wilson’s writings and thoughts as they emerged from the cultural context of mental mapping during and after World War I.”⁵⁸

Examining America’s missteps further, Lipušček also illustrates an almost-eerie claim: “what is striking from today’s point of view is that many of the analyses and studies carried out by the State Department and the Inquiry during the time of the First World War literally predicted the outcome of events in the Balkan region at the end of the last century.”⁵⁹ In other words, the concerns of many American statesmen and experts regarding the potential dangers and ultimate fate of the new – and, in earlier instances, purely-theoretical – country to a large extent came to fruition.

Indeed, as Lampe writes, even within Yugoslavia, “against the combination of an intolerant political culture and regional imbalances, Wilsonian liberal assumptions of a democratic future in a multi-ethnic state had little chance of survival by the 1930s.”⁶⁰ It was not the isolated histories of Balkan peoples that rendered their cultures inherently incompatible; indeed, the majority of Southern-Slavic society, save a few nationalistic factions, were, without outside influence, more than capable of overlooking their own ethnic differences, as history shows. Thus, the country that would enter tumultuous times prior to the Second World War – and that would still possess rifts paved over by Tito, before its collapse in the 1990s – was influenced by foreign powers and ideologies to such a degree as to disrupt local politics and

⁵⁷ Uroš Lipušček, “The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919”, op. cit., p. 70.

⁵⁸ Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵⁹ Uroš Lipušček, “The USA and the Establishment of the Kingdom of SHS 1918–1919”, op. cit., p. 70.

⁶⁰ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History – Twice There Was a Country (Second Edition)*, op. cit.

to give birth to strong senses of nationalism that would taint the potential cooperation that could have been.⁶¹

It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that a state rendered unstable due to contemporary external influences and modern interpretations of history should essentially have been made possible due to the outside influence and intervention of the United States, and ironic furthermore that that same United States, and NATO, would ultimately be instrumental the destruction of that state by way of the Wilsonian tradition.⁶² The actions of the US in the First Yugoslavia's eventual creation, while in some cases based on the expert advice of well-studied and capable officials, and executed with confidence and efficiency, in other ways was prone to disagreements and missteps, unintended outside influences, and blindness to various political problems and paradoxes that, not having been resolved during the country's creation, ultimately contributed, at least in part, to the dissolution of the state much later on in history.

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⁶¹ Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History*, op. cit., pp. 147–148.

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