

## The Independent Democratic Party and Antifascism, 1936–1939

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### Abstract:

This article provides a short overview of the Independent Democratic Party's (SDS) position on antifascism, Serb-Croat relations, and democratic solutions to Yugoslavia's domestic problems from 1936 to 1939. During this period the SDS took a distinctly different approach on the Spanish Civil War from their coalition partners, the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS). While both of these parties advocated good relations between Serbs and Croats, they responded differently to the rise of radical nationalism and fascism in Europe and in Croatia. Although the SDS was an example of a democratic party with an antifascist platform, the communist postwar historiography included them with other passive "bourgeois" interwar parties, contributing to perception in Croatia that equates antifascism exclusively with communism.

**Keywords:** Serb-Croat relations, Interwar Croatia, antifascism, Spanish Civil War

The narrative of Serb-Croat relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been dominated by conflict and ethnic violence. Unfortunately, the periods of tragedy have overshadowed the significant amount of political and cultural cooperation. The complex relationship between Serbs and Croats in Croatia has thus often been reduced to the "ancient hatreds" thesis, particularly in some Western scholarship, which ignores the legacy of multiethnic cooperation.

One period of political cooperation which has often been overlooked is the last decade of royal Yugoslavia. Although the 1930s are characterized by the rise of both radical left (communism) and right (fascism, Nazism) ideologies throughout Europe, as well as political instability in Yugoslavia because of the "national question," democratic Croat and Serb parties formed a coalition and sought to resolve Yugoslavia's crises through political dialogue, not violence. The invasion of Axis forces in April 1941 destroyed all hopes of preserving peace in this region, and Yugoslavia descended into a bloody ideological and ethnic war whose consequences can still be felt to this day.

Why did the political cooperation of the 1930s fail to prevent the interethnic violence after 1941? The Ustaše were a marginal group when they took power on the heels of the German and Italian invasion, yet their pro-fascist, totalitarian, and genocidal regime had, at least initially, the tacit support of most Croats. The Croatian people had overwhelmingly supported the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS-*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*) during the interwar period, when it had promoted good Serb-Croat relations and was in a coalition with the Independent Democratic Party (SDS-*Samostalna demokratska stranka*), a Croatian Serb party. There are certainly numerous factors, both domestic and

international, which contributed to the level and nature of violence during World War Two in Croatia, from Belgrade's oppressive rule to the influence of extremist ideologies.

One factor which I wish to emphasize, however, is that even though the HSS and SDS had functioned well in the coalition, they had very different positions on one important issue: antifascism. Whereas the HSS remained passive regarding the rise of fascism in Europe, in part because of the party's anticommunism, the SDS was a vocal proponent of antifascism, which became prominent during the period of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The failure to build a strong base of antifascism among Croatia's democratic parties allowed the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ – *Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*) to take the leading role in the antifascist resistance and eventual postwar seizure of power. This article provides a preliminary look at how the leading party of Croatian Serbs took a more proactive stance against fascism and extreme nationalism during the late 1930s, based on the lessons of the war in Spain, leading the SDS to conclude that only cooperation between Serbs and Croats could form the basis for a stable, democratic society in Croatia.

### ***Interwar Yugoslavia and the democratic opposition in Croatia***

Interwar Yugoslavia was characterized by the persistence of the “national” or “Croat” question, namely the inability to find an appropriate political, territorial, and national structure that would satisfy both Serbia (pushing for a centralized Yugoslav state) and Croatia (which had envisioned an equal partnership in the new country created in 1918). The internal problems only increased after the royal dictatorship was declared in 1929 by King Aleksandar, fostering the rise of radical political movements. Ethnic tensions were thus perpetuated by Serb dominance and Croat grievances in royal Yugoslavia. After 1929, the two leading pro-government parties were the Yugoslav National Party (JNS – *Jugoslovenska nacionalna stranka*) and the Yugoslav Radical Union (JRZ – *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica*). In Croatia, both of these parties were supported almost exclusively by Serbs, especially those working in the administration, gendarmerie, or business. The HSS had grown from simply a party of the peasantry into a national movement that attracted Croats from all classes, while the SDS represented those Croatian Serbs opposed to the centralized (and later dictatorial) rule from Belgrade.

The Peasant-Democratic Coalition (SDK – *Seljačko-demokratska koalicija*) was initially formed in 1927 between two erstwhile adversaries, Stjepan Radić (one of the founders of the HSS)<sup>1</sup> and Svetozar Pribičević (the founder of the SDS).<sup>2</sup> When political parties were once again legalized in 1935, the coalition pushed even harder for a federalized solution to Yugoslavia's crises. On most issues, especially regarding negotiations with the regime, the SDK presented a unified position. In November 1932, the SDK issued a manifesto of six points (*Zagrebačke punktacije*), which sharply condemned the authoritarian regime and the hegemony of Serbia, and sought the

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Radić (1871–1928) in English, see Mark Biondich, *Stjepan Radić: The Croat Peasant Party and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904–1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Pribičević (1875–1936), a Croatian Serb politician who was active in pushing for unification with Serbia after World War One, served as the minister of internal affairs in the 1920s. Ljubo Boban, *Svetozar Pribičević u opoziciji, 1928–1936* (Zagreb: Institut za hrvatsku povijest, 1973).

reorganization of the state into a federal system without any unit having greater power than the others.<sup>3</sup> HSS representatives called for brotherly relations and cooperation with Serbs, particularly in ethnically mixed regions such as Lika, Banija, and Kordun. The SDK also cooperated with the democratic opposition in Serbia; for the Serbian parties, however, the primary goal was to end the royal dictatorship, while the SDK pushed for a reorganization of the Yugoslav state.

The SDS, characterized by historian Drago Roksandić “as undoubtedly the leading party of Serbs in Croatia,”<sup>4</sup> was formed in March 1924 when Pribičević and several of his closest associates broke ranks with the Democratic Party over the implementation of the Vidovdan Constitution (1921). Although initially a strong supporter of Yugoslav centralism, the SDS became one of the leading pro-federalist parties when Pribičević realized that centralization was not just affecting Croats, but everyone in Croatia. This shift in position ultimately led to the alliance with the HSS in the Peasant-Democratic Coalition. An article in the Zagreb daily *Obzor* credited the SDS with preventing “an unbridgeable chasm to divide Croats and Serbs” after the death of Radić by staying loyal to the HSS.<sup>5</sup> Pribičević became one of King Aleksandar’s most outspoken critics, delivering a scathing attack of the post-1929 situation in the book *Diktatura kralja Aleksandra (The Dictatorship of King Aleksandar)*. After 1931 he went into exile in Paris and later Prague, where he died in September 1936. In his final testimony, dictated from his hospital bed, Pribičević repeatedly emphasized his commitment to democracy – “thus far the best and most perfect form of government” – and working in an alliance with the Croats to solve Yugoslavia’s problems, as well as a premonition of the dangers of fascism already threatening Abyssinia and Spain.<sup>6</sup>

After Svetozar Pribičević’s death, Srđan Budisavljević (1883–1968) became president of the SDS, eventually entering the Yugoslav government after the Cvetković-Maček *Sporazum* in 1939. Other SDS politicians of note included Sava Kosanović (1894–1956), Hinko Krizman (1881–1958), Većeslav Vilder (1878–1961), Adam Pribičević (1880–1957) and Rade Pribičević (1896–1953). Some of the party’s leadership, despite its favorable stance towards the Popular Front and antifascism, remained anticommunist and went into exile (such as Vilder), while a majority of SDS followers sided with the Partisans during World War Two.<sup>7</sup>

Both the HSS and SDS focused on improving the lives of Croat and Serb peasants, pushed for literacy and economic growth, and vehemently opposed the suppression of democracy in Yugoslavia. The two parties also promoted pacifism and a non-violent solution to the country’s myriad of problems. However, there existed striking differences between the HSS and the SDS leadership on the issue of the Spanish Civil War, as discussed in further detail below. The HSS leadership was adamantly anticommunist and rejected any attempts at allowing a Popular Front (an antifascist

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<sup>3</sup> Ivo Goldstein, *Hrvatska povijest* (Zagreb: Novi liber, 2003), p. 255.

<sup>4</sup> Drago Roksandić, *Srbi u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb: Vjesnik, 1991), p. 126. The modern Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS – *Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka*) considers itself to be the political inheritor of the SDS tradition. See the party’s program at [www.sdss.hr](http://www.sdss.hr).

<sup>5</sup> *Obzor* (Zagreb), 5 March 1938, reprinted in *Varaždinske novosti* (Varaždin), 10 March 1938, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Final message of Svetozar Pribičević, dictated to the SDS leadership (Budisavljević, Krizman, and Vilder) on 6 September 1936, reprinted in Roksandić, *Srbi u Hrvatskoj*, pp. 127–128.

<sup>7</sup> Stevan Moljević, an SDS member from Banja Luka, was a notable exception. He joined the Četniks and drafted an oft-cited pamphlet in 1941 featuring plans for the borders of a Greater Serbia

coalition) to be formed in Croatia, while the SDS was sympathetic to the Popular Front governments in Spain and France, and repeatedly spoke out against the growth of fascism in Europe. This open antifascist position in the 1930s, as well as social democratic leanings, helps to explain why Croatia's Serbs joined the Partisans en masse when faced with Ustaša genocide rather than supporting the Četnik movement.<sup>8</sup>

The Ustaše, once in power, specifically targeted SDS members as part of their anti-Serbian policies. Tomasevich asserts that SDS followers “formed the most important element of Partisan forces in Croatia during the first two years of resistance, and they remained an essential part of these forces until the end of the war.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, I have been unable to find specific numbers for how many SDS members joined Partisan forces as opposed to the Četniks, due to the lack of documentary evidence in a period of lawlessness, chaos, and numerous armed bands whose allegiance was often apt to change based on what was most pragmatic at the time. However, most scholars working on this topic agree that SDS members overwhelmingly supported the Partisans, precisely because of their pro-Yugoslav and antifascist policies articulated in the late 1930s.

### *Antifascism and the Spanish Civil War in the SDS press*

Although both the HSS and the SDS concentrated their political activities on restructuring the Yugoslav state and liberalizing the political system, the SDS leaders were also conscious of, and commented on, events in other parts of Europe. This was most evident in *Nova riječ*, edited by Vilder and published in Zagreb. It functioned as the main paper for the SDS, and it reported on all of the party's activities in Croatia as well as international developments.<sup>10</sup> The newspaper propagated an overtly left-wing position, in particular on issues such as the war in Spain, between the Republicans (the Popular Front government supported by the Soviet Union) and the Nationalists (rebels backed by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy). Because of this stance, the editors were constantly engaged in bitter polemics with other newspapers, and *Nova riječ* became the target of vicious attacks in *Hrvatska straža* and other Church publications, JNS and JRZ papers, and in the extreme right-wing Croatian press. The tone of *Nova riječ*, and *Varaždinske novosti* (edited by Hinko Krizman in Varaždin) to a lesser degree, vividly illustrates the significantly different position of the SDS leadership from their HSS allies. Whereas SDS papers openly condemned the growth of fascism, the HSS preferred to ignore international events that could potentially radicalize the Croatian people. The

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<sup>8</sup> Roksandić, *Srbi u Hrvatskoj*, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 368.

<sup>10</sup> On the application form required to publish a newspaper, *Nova riječ* was characterized as “a political paper of the ideology of the former SDS,” with a circulation of 4,000 copies. Vilder was listed as the main editor. O redakcijama i tiskarama listova, časopisa, i spisa, Hrvatski državni arhiv (HDA), fond 145 (SBODZ), box 511, no. 12599.

passive, parochial attitude of the HSS press reflected the politics of the party's leadership, which sealed the party's fate after war engulfed Croatia in April 1941.<sup>11</sup>

Despite expressing sympathy for the fate of the Spanish peasant, the HSS spent very little effort in analyzing the economic and historical background of the agrarian aspect of the Spanish Civil War. This is in contrast to the approach of the SDS, for example, which in the very first issue of *Nova riječ* broke with the HSS in reporting on Spain by printing a detailed, three-part analysis of the war, "World War on Spanish Ground" by Josip Smodlaka. Smodlaka wrote about the dismal condition of "the millions of Spanish peasants without their own land, many of whom had to share the scant earnings from the land with two or even three landlords, and the hundreds of thousands of industrial workers uncared for and exploited by big capital, for the most part foreign."<sup>12</sup>

Unlike their coalition partners and the regime, the SDS did not view the Spanish Civil War as simply a conflict between two foreign, totalitarian ideologies, i.e. communism and fascism. *Varaždinske novosti* reported that it was "a clash of two ideas, the ideas of the reactionaries to enslave the people, represented by the rebels, and the ideas of democracy, represented by the government, whose accomplishments are observed with sympathy by those in the world who are progressive, democratically inclined, and have human feelings."<sup>13</sup> "Contemporary Spain cannot be truly understood," asserted the editor, Krizman, "if one does not know Spain's past, the past inquisitions, dictatorships, generals' coups, anarchist worker movements, and medieval agrarian conditions."<sup>14</sup> *Nova riječ*, presenting a series of articles on the background of the conflict, persuasively argued that

Regardless of what has been written to the contrary, in Spain the revolution is homegrown. It has its own distinct causes and specific character, just as all of its leaders are native sons...<sup>15</sup>

The paper contended that the Popular Front government had been composed of "praiseworthy professors and other honorable citizens" who unfortunately were not decisive enough in Spain's moment of need, which led to the uprising by the "rebels who, just like the fascists, call themselves nationalists, are composed of all the conservative forces in the country: big industry, large landowners, remains of the nobility, royalists, Carlists, upper bourgeoisie, aristocrats, clerical youth, and of course the Catholic clergy."<sup>16</sup>

*Nova riječ* carried articles that differed from the standard battle reports (often exaggerated) which dominated the front pages of *Hrvatski dnevnik*, *Obzor*, and *Jutarnji list*, such as an analysis of Republican war posters ("Art on the Walls of Wartime

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed examination of the HSS press during the Spanish Civil War, see Vjeran Pavlaković, "Vladko Maček, the Croatian Peasant Party and the Spanish Civil War," in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2007), pp. 233–246.

<sup>12</sup> *Nova riječ* (Zagreb), 1 November 1936, p. 4. Smodlaka, a Dalmatian statesman, had been in Spain as a Minister Plenipotentiary on behalf of the Yugoslav government and had witnessed the outbreak of the war.

<sup>13</sup> *Varaždinske novosti* (13 August 1936), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Varaždinske novosti* (26 November 1936), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Nova riječ* (1 November 1936), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Spain”)<sup>17</sup> and a rare account of Yugoslavs fighting in Spain (“Slovenes in the Spanish War”).<sup>18</sup> The latter article featured an interview with a Slovene worker in Spain, who stated

If you ask me, am I a communist? No, I am a Slovene nationalist. We are waging a war against fascism...Slovenes and Croats from the coast [Primorje] generally stick together and form a small, but fearless unit.<sup>19</sup>

Such an article would never be printed in an official HSS publication, let alone a regime newspaper, since it indicated that Slovenes, Croats, and other Yugoslavs were not only supporting the Republic but actually fighting in Spain, and that these individuals were waging a struggle that extended far beyond the borders of Spain.

Although willing to explore the origin and meanings of the war to a much greater degree than the leadership of the HSS, the SDS came to a similar conclusion regarding the “lessons” of Spain. Krizman believed that the “maxim of Spain teaches all peoples that only democracy is the path towards peaceful development and a righteous life, that all national forces must responsibly participate in building the political order, that the methods for political and social struggle can only be legal and constitutional, and that national misfortune results from anyone who introduces violence and hatred into political life.”<sup>20</sup> Vilder, reflecting on seven months of warfare in Spain, argued that the carnage there should be a lesson

...for all those who lead countries and those in opposition, all those who see in physical retribution, in revolution, and blood, the only solution. Foreign help arrives, and it does not ease the war, but rather prolongs the misfortune and will exact heavy and bloody price.<sup>21</sup>

The SDS thus remained true to the HSS tenets of pacifism and democracy, yet conveyed a strong antifascist attitude in its press and public appearances. At a speech in Vriginmost on 28 February 1937, two SDS deputies addressed the crowd and, according to a police report, in addition to calling for unity between Serbs and Croats and the need for freedom of the press, spoke “against fascism, because fascism constricts national freedom.”<sup>22</sup> The HSS, meanwhile, was willing to sacrifice some of its morals in order to “preserve” the unity of its national movement, which included a growing right wing with pro-fascist sympathies, and consequently did not openly favor the Republican government or the concept of an antifascist front until a portion of its leadership switched over to the Partisans in 1943.

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<sup>17</sup> *Nova riječ* (27 May 1937), pp. 5–6.

<sup>18</sup> *Nova riječ* (25 February 1937), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* The author of the article adds that “It certainly would be interesting if the experiences of these soldiers were published after the war,” which, judging by the numerous memoirs of Spanish Civil War veterans, is precisely what happened.

<sup>20</sup> *Varaždinske novosti* (26 November 1936), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Nova riječ* (18 February 1937), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Kraljevskoj banskoj upravi Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. br. 279-1937 (1 March 1937), HDA, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 508, no. 6182.

Considering the discrepancy between the HSS and SDS interpretations of the Spanish Civil War and its implications, it is noteworthy that there was little debate between the two parties on this issue; both seemed to ignore the other's position, at least in their respective presses. The most vicious assaults launched against the SDS, and *Nova riječ* in particular, came from Church newspapers such as *Hrvatska straža*, which engaged in ongoing polemics with Vilder and his associates in its editorial columns, and a number of newspapers from the radical right (*Nezavisnost*, *Mlada Hrvatska*, *Hrvatski narod*, etc.). For them the SDS was a Serb party, and the fact that its founder was none other than Svetozar Pribićević, who rushed Croatia into a union with Serbia in 1918, only magnified the ferocity of its opponents. The SDS's positive view of the Popular Fronts in Spain and France, considered nothing more than communist-freemason-Jewish conspiracies, provoked such vitriolic retorts by the right-wing press that one can imagine the editors of these publications practically frothing at the mouth as they wrote their denunciations. Reacting to accusations from *Hrvatska straža* that it was nothing but "propaganda of a Popular Front ideology," a *Nova riječ* editorial declared "We are in a 'front' of great cultural democracy."<sup>23</sup>

As much as the HSS used the violence in Spain to slam Croatian communists, the SDS used the example of Spain to criticize sympathizers of fascism in Croatia, and drew attention to the brutal and intolerant nature of Francisco Franco's Nationalist forces. SDS members criticized Dimitrije Ljotić's pro-fascist *Zbor* party, which claimed "the horrors of the civil war in Spain are the consequences and fruit of democracy," and warned of the dangers of such an antidemocratic and militant movement.<sup>24</sup> *Nova riječ* was also one of the rare newspapers that actively criticized the propaganda being generated in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, primarily from the Nationalist side, which was regularly reprinted by Zagreb's main dailies without question or verification of accuracy. For example, the paper jokingly suggested that anybody "who wants General Franco to advance quicker should buy *Hrvatska straža* for one *dinar*, so that at least they can sleep peacefully that night," a reference to that paper's tendency to report non-existent victories by the Nationalists.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the differing opinions on Spain during the first year of the war, the SDS ultimately remained loyal to their coalition partners. There was no attempt to argue for the creation of an antifascist Popular Front in Croatia, despite the party's generally sympathetic view towards those coalitions in Spain and France. The HSS had made it clear that no political collaboration was possible with communists, even though the left-wing of that party was likewise sympathetic to the Popular Front. The SDS had entered into a coalition with socialists in Vojvodina, but rejected criticism from Zagreb papers such as *Obzor* that this amounted to a Popular Front, since the socialists themselves were wary of communist intentions, and that instead this was a "front of democracy."<sup>26</sup> In other instances *Nova riječ* insisted that they did not support a Popular Front because the SDK was the only "front" that they needed. Despite distancing themselves from the

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<sup>23</sup> *Nova riječ* (5 November 1936), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Nova riječ* (12 November 1936), p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Nova riječ* (8 April 1937), p. 8. In the fall of 1936, *Hrvatska straža* reported several times that Madrid had fallen to Franco's troops even though battles still raged on the outskirts of the city and the defenders were eventually able to push them back.

<sup>26</sup> *Nova riječ* (19 November 1936), p. 8.

Popular Front in response to accusations from the right, the SDS consistently articulated a different position on the Spanish Civil War than the HSS, one that was considerably more pro-Republican and antifascist.

### *The SDS and the national question*

Although in many regards the conflict in Spain was between the left (Popular Front) and right (Nationalists), the Catalan and Basque peoples had supported the democratically elected government in hopes of securing greater national rights. The SDS paid more attention to the national question in Spain, especially during the Nationalist offensive against the Basque Provinces, than their coalition partners the HSS. The Croatian Serbs of the SDS had realized that the resolution of the Croat question would ultimately benefit them as well, and in their leading newspaper the party's leaders asserted that "the 'Croat question' is not an obstacle, but it can serve as a lever so that our entire state can be placed on healthy democratic and social foundations."<sup>27</sup> Having supported the antifascist struggle in Spain, SDS leaders openly called for the support of the national rights of Basques and Catalans. *Nova riječ* closely followed the tragic events in the Basque Provinces as they developed, describing how the Nationalists used Italian and Moroccan troops in the offensive, as well as "terror bombing" against Basque civilians. Its editorials described the efforts of the Basques as "the heroic characteristics of a small nation which fights for its freedoms and independence."<sup>28</sup> The SDS, which had championed democracy and tolerance, severely criticized Franco's pledges to revoke the autonomy granted to various regions under the Republic. Unlike the right-wing, which justified the abolition of Catalonian autonomy because the Catalan people had sided with the Popular Front, leading SDS members argued that Catalonia should have given even more support to the Republican government and fully committed to the program of the Popular Front.<sup>29</sup>

The party leaders increasingly began to speak out against neutrality as the campaign against the Basques headed towards a Nationalist victory in the north. In the article "There is No Neutrality," Vilder essentially questioned the HSS policy without explicitly naming HSS president Vladko Maček:

If we, as small peoples in a state of flux, who cry out for freedom and justice, do not understand the struggle of the Spanish people, how can others understand us? If in the struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed we wish to play the role of indifferent and neutral, what right do we have to ask the world to be interested in our own misfortunes?<sup>30</sup>

Vilder's conclusion was that it was not possible to be neutral towards the question of war, especially in Spain. Several months later another prominent SDS politician, Hinko

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<sup>27</sup> *Nova riječ* (6 May 1937), p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Nova riječ* (8 July 1937), p. 3. In the summer of 1937, *Nova riječ* published a large number of articles about the history and culture of the Basques, such as "Who Are the Basques" on 13 May 1937, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Nova riječ* (9 June 1938), p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Nova riječ* (8 July 1937), p. 1.

Krizman, penned a large front-page article in *Nova riječ* that declared “The End of Neutrality.” For Krizman,

Neutrality as a principle is only an asylum of ignorance... That is why any nation will be thoroughly deceived if they believe that only in their neutrality will they find security and benefit. The fundamental principle of international law, that one state does not have the right to interfere in the internal affairs of another state, has been abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the leadership of the HSS, which acted as if the Croat question could be resolved only by them and irrespective of international events, Vilder, Krizman, and other members of the SDS realized that the war in Spain merely foreshadowed the dark events to come. Speaking at a political meeting in the ethnically mixed Kordun region in January 1938, SDS leader Rade Pribičević warned that “dictatorship and fascism have seized power in several foreign countries, and that is leading to an unavoidable war, against which we must do everything possible.”<sup>32</sup> However, the SDS seems to have been unable to influence the course or position of their senior coalition partners, remaining loyal to the HSS despite the increasingly disparate view on issues such as Spain and antifascism.

In 1938, as the regime continued to relax the restrictions on political activity, HSS and SDS representatives referred to the events in Spain in their speeches, although with differing objectives. Whereas the HSS portrayed the bloody, fratricidal war in Spain as a warning to Croats to remain unified under the leadership of the HSS, the SDS realized that Spain was only one example of the fascist aggression that threatened European peace. Hitler’s annexation of Austria in March 1938 (*Anschluss*) and the Sudetenland six months later surpassed coverage of the war in Spain in the Croatian press, which either confirmed the fears of those with antifascist sympathy, or emboldened those who hoped Hitler’s “New Order” would reach the Balkans.

Like the Peasant Party, the SDS also actively campaigned in 1938 for the elections scheduled for December. However, in contrast to the position of the HSS, the SDS leaders gave the Popular Front even more support after Hitler’s absorption of Austria into the Third Reich. *Nova riječ* and *Varaždinske novosti* continued to emphasize antifascism in their articles and editorials. A police report noted that Krizman was spreading pro-Popular Front propaganda among Varaždin’s students and SDS followers, while Sava Kosanović, another member of the SDS leadership, was “publicly in favor of action for a Popular Front and condemning every rapprochement between Rome and Berlin.”<sup>33</sup> In another speech, Srdjan Budisavljević slammed the regime of Milan Stojadinović for continuing to make pacts with Italy and Germany even though they had openly supported the Nationalists with arms and soldiers.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Nova riječ* (28 January 1938), p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. broj 1857/37 (2 January 1938), HDA, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 528, no. 33/38.

<sup>33</sup> Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. broj 7905/1938 (7 April 1938), HDA, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 549, no. 8695.

<sup>34</sup> Kraljevska banska uprava Savske banovine, Odeljak za državnu zaštitu, Pov. broj 523/1938 (4 April 1938), HDA, fond 145 (SBODZ), box 550, no. 10566.

Although the elections of 11 December 1938 did not give the SDK an outright victory, the poor showing of the government's candidates led to the dismissal of Prime Minister Stojadinović and the appointment of Dragiša Cvetković. The new prime minister was more open to negotiation with the Croatian opposition, leading to the Cvetković-Maček *Sporazum* in August 1939 and the creation of the Croatian Banovina. Five HSS and one SDS member entered the Yugoslav government, and despite this important step in resolving Yugoslavia's crises, many considered it too little too late. While the SDS considered the *Sporazum* "their crowning achievement," Serb nationalists rallied supporters inside the new Croatian Banovina and in other parts of Yugoslavia under the slogan "Serbs Come Together" (*Srbi na okup*).<sup>35</sup> They "felt frustrated and humiliated, if not betrayed, because the Croats had obtained rights that were still denied Serbs,"<sup>36</sup> especially because the *Sporazum* had failed to guarantee them any minority rights.<sup>37</sup> The SDS, however, sought to preserve good Serb-Croat relations. SDS members condemned Belgrade's *Srpski glas* (*Serbian Herald*) and Zagreb's *Srpska riječ* (*Serbian Word*) for stirring up anti-Croat sentiment among Croatian Serbs and souring relations between the two groups. Sava Kosanović contended that the growth of Serbian extremism in the Croatian Banovina played into the hands of radical Croatian nationalists, who also sought to sow hatred between Serbs and Croats.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939 and the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941 sabotaged hopes for achieving peaceful solutions to Serb-Croat problems, as the extremist Ustaša and Četnik options thrived in the maelstrom of war.

## **Conclusion**

In postwar communist historiography, all the "bourgeois parties" were lumped together as being equally "reactionary", in contrast to the KPJ, which was allegedly the only political force that had supported the Spanish Republic and antifascism. However, based on SDS publications and the text of their members' speeches, it is clear that this party, and not only its factions that were infiltrated by communists, was far more sympathetic to the Popular Front and antifascism than its subsequent portrayal in postwar Yugoslavia. The exclusion of this interesting facet of the Peasant-Democratic Coalition served to both discredit all interwar bourgeois parties and establish the KPJ as the only antifascist political force from the 1930s on through the National Liberation War. Even though some of the SDS leadership, notably Sava Kosanović and Rade Pribićević, joined Tito's movement during World War Two, others became anti-communist and died in

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<sup>35</sup> For example, see the speeches of the SDS leadership in regards to the *Sporazum* in *Nova riječ* (31 August 1939), pp. 4–5.

<sup>36</sup> Alex Dragnich, *The First Yugoslavia: Search for a Viable Political System* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), p. 125.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the two World Wars* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), p. 261.

<sup>38</sup> See *Nova riječ* (15 February 1940), p. 7; and (22 February 1940), p. 7.

exile, such as Adam Pribičević and Vilder.<sup>39</sup> In the black and white communist historiography of the war, there was no place for a political organization that had been passionately antifascist for as long as the KPJ, yet was critical of communism. Even after the fall of communism in the 1990s, there has been virtually nothing written about the SDS in the period after Svetozar Pribičević's death, although there have been several monographs and biographies about his role in the party up until 1936.

The exclusion of the SDS and other non-communists from the antifascist narrative in communist Yugoslavia resulted in many Croats associating antifascism only with the communist movement, and all of the negative consequences of that totalitarian system. A closer look at the activities of the SDS in the late 1930s reveals that a democratic party could likewise aggressively condemn fascism, the most extreme form of virulent nationalism. In contrast, the HSS adopted a passive approach towards the war in Spain and the rise of fascism, and subsequently the pro-fascist Ustaša regime. Nevertheless, the coalition of the HSS and SDS during the interwar period could serve as a model for Croat-Serb relations, and deserves more attention by scholars of the turbulent twentieth century.

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<sup>39</sup> Adam Pribičević, committed suicide in Windsor, Canada, while Vilder was placed under surveillance during his exile in England, and was "revealed" to have been in the pay of the English secret services for a number of years. See HDA, personal dossier of Većeslav Vilder.