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# The Bridge of King Alexander I in Belgrade and the Ambiguities of National Identity in Interwar Yugoslavia

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In the period between the proclamation of royal dictatorship and the assassination of King Alexander I, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was characterised by the dynamics of competing visions of Yugoslavism. Questions concerning the identity of a Yugoslav nation-to-be, in terms of both national unity and diversity of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, were held not only in political discourse, but also through architecture and the visual culture. This article explores the ideological roles of the Bridge of King Alexander I, built between 1929 and 1934 to connect Belgrade with the ex-Habsburg town of Zemun, which carried not only heavy transport but also powerful political messages. The bridge's construction prompted a widespread public controversy, representing a vivid testimony to rivalries, tensions and discontents between different ideas about the Yugoslav nation, underpinned by both political and professional agendas.

## Introduction

When in 1918 Belgrade became the capital of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (from 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), this was not merely a matter of changing its nominal status, but a crucial event in the cultural imagination of the newly recognised nation. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the ex-Serbian capital was rapidly 'Yugoslavised'. Migrations from all over the country became intensive; not only did the city's population triple, but its ethnic structure altered towards increased heterogeneity, which influenced the transformation of the once dreary, 'dingy town',<sup>1</sup> the place of unpretentious architecture,<sup>2</sup> into a rapidly modernising city, with numerous urban projects and infrastructural works changing the cityscape and its cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> The city's architecture, perhaps most conspicuously, reveals how different visions of 'being Yugoslav' were negotiated in the public discourse. A particularly vivid example of this phenomenon was the Bridge of King Alexander I, commonly known as the Zemun Bridge, built across the Sava River between 1929 and 1934 to

<sup>1</sup> Philip Morton Shand, 'A Note on the New Belgrade', *Architect's Journal*, 1734 (April 11, 1928), 504, cited after: Ljiljana Blagojević, *Modernism in Serbia: The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture 1919–1941* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), x–xi, see also 127.

<sup>2</sup> Zlata Vuksanović-Macura, *Život na ivici: stanovanje sirotinje u Beogradu 1919–1941* (Belgrade: Orion Art, 2012), 40. See also: Tanja D. Conley, *Urban Architectures in Interwar Yugoslavia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 93. On the dreary visual appearance of the city embankments in the 1930s see: Branislav Kojić, *Društveni uslovi razvitka arhitektonske struke u Beogradu 1920–1940. godine* (Belgrade: SANU, 1979), 19. The reality of Belgrade's urban appearance stood in sharp contrast with historiographical myths about the pre-1914 'golden age of Serbia'; see: Dubravka Stojanović, *Srbija i demokratija 1903–1914: Istorijska studija o 'zlatnom dobu srpske demokratije'* (Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2003). On Belgrade urbanism and infrastructure within this context see: Dubravka Stojanović, *Kaldrma i asfalt: urbanizacija u evropeizacija Beograda 1890–1914* (Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> On Belgrade's urban and social transformation in the interwar period see: Conley, *Urban Architectures*, 89–126; Tanja Damljanović Conley, 'Belgrade', in Emily Gunzburger Makaš and Tanja Damljanović Conley, eds., *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning in Central and Southeastern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 45–60.

connect Belgrade with the ex-Habsburg town of Zemun. The principal idea of its construction was to both literally and metaphorically span the territories that had been politically separated for many centuries, only to be joined together in the new Yugoslav era. As a symbol of the 'unified Yugoslav people, which had been severed by the Sava River for centuries',<sup>4</sup> the bridge became a crucial landmark in the transforming cityscape.<sup>5</sup> The very act of spanning the dividing river soon acquired different meanings and ideological slants related to the unsettled national question which far surpassed the bridge's utilitarian importance, as well as its mere symbolism of uniting Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Although extensive, the literature on this modern piece of engineering and architecture has failed to recognise its pivotal role in a wider social and political arena concerning the Yugoslav national narrative,<sup>6</sup> which otherwise characterises some of the most distinguished studies on Belgrade's interwar architecture, with a notable exception of Tanja D. Conley's work.<sup>7</sup> These studies have failed to comprehend important relationships between architecture and nation-building in interwar Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> Ljiljana Blagojević's focus on Belgrade modern architecture is one of the key representatives of this historiographical trend. While acknowledging that Serbian modern architecture 'remained but a marginal and provisional construct of modernity' and 'the primary vehicle for deprovincialization', she unfortunately has not appreciated its political relevance, primarily due to the lack of contextualisation.<sup>9</sup> The same distinguishes essays on architecture in the volume *On the Very Edge: Modernism and Modernity of Interwar Serbia*, in which the cultural complexities of Belgrade architecture were understood without taking into account their crucial political dimension.<sup>10</sup>

Seen in its own ideological and political context, however, the Zemun Bridge represented not only a modern piece of architecture and engineering but it simultaneously reinforced the officially-driven authority of national unity and both negotiated and questioned the ways in which a prospective Yugoslav nation should be achieved. During the process of its construction the bridge became a kind of ideological laboratory in which different designs by the Russian émigré architect Nikola Krasnov and the Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović were being presented and discussed. Their designs seemingly endorsed the official symbolism of national unity – but only seemingly, for both Krasnov and Meštrović's ideas soon acquired different and more complex meanings in the public discourse.

The bridge was among many grand infrastructural projects of the 1930s in Yugoslavia which, apart from their local specificities, testified to a newly invigorated role of architecture as a rhetorical device, which was pertinent to the demise of democratic governments and institutions in 1930s Europe.<sup>11</sup> In the time when more European countries, like Yugoslavia, were under some kind of authoritarian rule, with the conditions of persistent economic, social and political crises, as well as gaping ideological and political divisions in most of the nation-states, great architectural and infrastructural projects acquired a further important role of displaying the strength of the regimes and their unanimous policy towards centralisation and nationalisation. More specifically, modern large-scale projects, linking different parts of cities and regions, became vivid symbols of national unity and stability of the state, legitimating social transformation, progressivism and technological mastery that characterised the image of

<sup>4</sup> Aleksandra Ilijevski, 'Prilog proučavanju arhitekture i ideologije Mosta viteškog kralja Aleksandra prvog ujedinitelja u Beogradu', *Nasledje*, 13 (2013), 211.

<sup>5</sup> Kojić, *Društveni uslovi*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Among others: Aleksandar Kadrijević, 'Savsko priobalje u Beogradu (1918–1941): pogled na arhitektonsko-urbanistički razvoj', in Branko Ostajmer, ed., *Rijeka Sava u povijesti* (Slavonski Brod: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2015), 505–24; Ilijevski, 'Prilog proučavanju', 211–9; Aleksandar Kadrijević, 'Istorija i arhitektura Zemunskog mosta Kralja Aleksandra I Karađordjevića', *Pinus Zapisi*, 4 (1996), 7–19.

<sup>7</sup> Conley, *Urban Architectures*; Conley, 'Belgrade'.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationships between architectural culture and Yugoslav nation-building see: Aleksandar Ignjatović, *Jugoslovenstvo u arhitekturi 1904–1941* (Belgrade: Gradjevinska knjiga, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Blagojević, *Modernism*, x.

<sup>10</sup> Jelena Bogdanović, Lilien Filipovitch Robinson and Igor Marjanović, eds., *On the Very Edge: Modernism and Modernity of Interwar Serbia* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> On architectural, urban and infrastructural constructions in interwar Yugoslavia and their ideological roles see: Conley, *Architectures*; Ignjatović, *Jugoslovenstvo*.

all authoritarian regimes – from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to the Stalinist Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, certain parallels can be drawn between these political projects and Yugoslavism in terms of the use of architecture and visual culture as well as a symbiosis of modernism and monumentalism which the Zemun Bridge truly epitomised.<sup>13</sup>

The case of Yugoslavism is undoubtedly comparable to the propensity of revolutionary and dictatorial regimes of the time for grand architectural and infrastructural works, reordering cities and building bridges – to mention just the ideological relevance of the gargantuan bridges in Germany representing the achievements of the world's 'master race' or the imperial topography of Rome's urban landscape.<sup>14</sup> Even more particularly, the ideological roles of the Zemun Bridge were closely comparable to the engineering enterprises which had a crucial role in other newly-formed political entities in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East of the time, from Czechoslovakia to Turkey and mandate Palestine, where 'new nation-states . . . initially adopted modern architecture and urbanism as what they perceived to be statements of national independence, pride and progress'.<sup>15</sup>

Although the Kingdom of Yugoslavia is usually perceived as a nation-state, the idea of which nation this state referred to was complex and dubious.<sup>16</sup> First, there was a notion of South Slavs (or Yugoslavs) as a primordial national community, which appeared in the early-nineteenth century under the label 'national oneness' (*narodno jedinstvo*); it had a chequered history that reached its political climax with the creation of the first Yugoslav state in 1918. Primordialism saw the differences between Serbs, Croats and Slovenes as superficial, minor and caused by foreign influences, as well as by different conditions under which these ethnic groups, believed to represent a monolithic, primordial community, had been developed in the past.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, there was a less idealistic prospect of the Yugoslav nation, which is seen as a synthesis of the independent, albeit closely related, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In this synthetic

<sup>12</sup> On Germany see: Joshua Hagen and Robert C. Ostergren, *Building Nazi Germany: Place, Space, Architecture and Ideology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019); Jochen Thies, *Hitler's Plans for Global Domination: Nazi Architecture and Ultimate War Aims* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014). On Italy see: Brian L. McLaren, *Modern Architecture, Empire and Race in Fascist Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Lucy M. Maunsby, *Fascism, Architecture and the Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922–1943* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Aristotle Kallis, *The Third Rome: The Making of the Fascist Capital* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). On the Soviet Union see: Katherine Zubovich, *Moscow Monumental: Soviet Skyscrapers and Urban Life in Stalin's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Danilo Udovički-Selb, 'Between Modernism and Socialist Realism: Soviet Architectural Culture Under Stalin's Revolution from Above: 1928–1938', *Journal of Architectural Historians*, 68, 4 (2009), 467–95; Hugh D. Hudson, Jr., *Blueprints and Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture, 1917–1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> See: Michael Mikenberg, 'Introduction', in Michael Mikenberg, ed., *Power and Architecture: The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space* (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Thies, *Plans*, 79; Hagen and Ostergren, *Building*, 91–6; Paul Baxa, 'Piacentini's Window: The Modernism of the Fascist Master Plan of Rome', *Contemporary European History*, 13, 1 (2004), 1–20; McLaren, *Architecture*, 33–53.

<sup>15</sup> Sibel Bozdoğan, *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>16</sup> On the history of Yugoslavism see: Dennison Rusinow, 'The Yugoslav Idea Before Yugoslavia', in Dejan Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918–1992* (London: Hurst, 2003), 11–26; Arnold Suppan, 'Yugoslavism versus Serbian, Croatian, and Slovene Nationalism', in Norman M. Naimark and Holly Case, eds., *Yugoslavia and its Historians: Understanding the Balkan Wars of the 1990s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 116–39; Dejan Djokić, *Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia* (New York: Hurst, 2007); Ivo Banac, *National Question in Yugoslavia. Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 21–140; Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs: Identity in King Alexander's Yugoslavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Among numerous studies of Yugoslavism the most important are: Djokić, *Compromise*; Dejan Djokić, '(Dis)integrating Yugoslavia: King Alexander and Interwar Yugoslavism', in Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism*, 136–56; Banac, *Question*, 98–102; Wolf Dietrich Behschnitt, *Nationalismus bei Serben und Kroaten, 1830–1914. Analyse und Typologie der nationalen Ideologie* (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1980). Also see: John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71–194; Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-building and Legitimation, 1918–2005* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 35–112; Carole Rogel, *The Slovenes and Yugoslavism, 1890–1914* (Boulder, CO: East European Quarterly, 1977), 70–6.

perspective, which can be called Yugoslav syncretism, the particular historical and cultural traditions of South Slavs should remain and amalgamate into a composite but coherent national identity. Contrary to primordialism, which legitimised political centralism and entailed the process of cultural homogenisation, proponents of Yugoslav syncretism opted for cultural diversification and had a more lenient policy towards state centralisation.

Finally, there was a particular framework of seeing Yugoslavs not in terms of ethnicity and history, but common civic identities and political interests. This supra-national Yugoslavism relied on the concept of a solid and stable national culture deeply rooted in the cultural and political values of the West. Apart from keeping the rising threats of particular nationalisms at bay, this ideology helped sustain a coveted image of the nation beyond the traditional stigma of cultural backwardness commonly attached to all Balkan peoples at the time.<sup>18</sup>

These three major identity paradigms, related to different types of the ideology of Yugoslavism which are already well-studied in the literature,<sup>19</sup> were not mutually exclusive but were all politically highly instrumental. Throughout the interwar period, various political subjects in the country constantly moved from one form of Yugoslavism to another in order to shape their political ends. During the first post-war decade, primordial Yugoslavism was advocated by numerous political parties, from the Serbian Democrats to the Slovene Liberals. In its syncretic variant, Yugoslavism was popular with the Croatian Peasant Party and the Slovene Social Democrats, but also with the major Serbian party, the Radicals. This party, however, was pragmatically moving from one paradigm of Yugoslavism to another. As Ivo Banac has put it, the Radicals believed that each of three national cultures 'would survive as long as it showed signs of vitality', assuming however that the Serbs were stronger and superior and would eventually engulf the other two nations.<sup>20</sup> Primordial Yugoslavism served the ideological reinforcement of such a national policy and a rigid state centralism.<sup>21</sup> Even during the years of the Royal Dictatorship, the regime combined these two concepts of Yugoslavism in various proportions, with no clear answers which would formulate a properly forged identity formula, as Christian Nielsen aptly demonstrated.<sup>22</sup>

After the reintroduction of democratic parliamentary life in 1931, in the time when the Zemun Bridge was being constructed, the major political actors of the regime continued to pursue Yugoslav primordialism, but most of them were more lenient towards it. At the same time, the main political opponents of the Belgrade regime were tepid supporters of Yugoslav syncretism in their unanimous disapproval of centralism and Serbian hegemony;<sup>23</sup> various Serbian democratic parties too distanced themselves from primordial Yugoslavism.<sup>24</sup> After the king's assassination in 1934, primordial Yugoslavism became more and more sidelined in the political discourse. It was in this context when the regime made substantial ideological shifts, becoming more oriented towards Yugoslav universalism, in order to achieve not an ethnically-based but an overarching civic Yugoslav identity which would serve as a basis for their realpolitik. During the time of the royal regency, Yugoslav political elites believed that a supra-national model of Yugoslav identity had a potential to gradually reduce the threats of rising Serbian and Croatian nationalism and strengthen the nation as the political crisis of 'Versailles Europe' was moving to its critical point.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On this particular topic see: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> While Christian Nielsen, relying on Behschnitt's typology, distinguishes unitarist, integral and federal Yugoslavism, as well as pseudo-Yugoslavism, other authors propose different typologies. See: Jovo Bakić, *Ideologije jugoslovenstva između srpskog i hrvatskog nacionalizma: 1914–1941* (Zrenjanin: Gradska i narodna biblioteka, 2004); Ljubodrag Dimić, *Kulturna politika Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1918–1941, vol. 1* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1996), 285–323.

<sup>20</sup> Banac, *Question*, 163.

<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the Serbian Democrats also pursued the primordialist variant of Yugoslavism; although politically opposed to the Radicals, they too advocated 'national oneness' for justifying political centralism, but not in terms of assuming Serbian supremacy; see: Banac, *Question*, 188.

<sup>22</sup> Nielsen, *Yugoslavs*, 151. However, Nielsen's account of the cultural dimension of Yugoslavism does not surpass the scope and depth of Ivo Banac's seminal study.

<sup>23</sup> Namely, the Croatian Peasant-Democratic Coalition, the Yugoslav Muslim Organization and the Slovene People's Party.

<sup>24</sup> Dimić, *Politika*, 316; Nielsen, *Yugoslavs*, 211–17, 230–1.

<sup>25</sup> Arhiv Jugoslavije (Archives of Yugoslavia, hereafter AJ), Program Jugoslovenske radikalne zajednice, Zbirka Milana Stojadinovića (37), f-12/a. j. 79.

These ideologies of Yugoslavism were not abstract premises but were based upon different cultural practices, among which architecture had a very prominent role. Debates concerning the nature of the Yugoslav nation and ways to accomplish national unity – either by uniformity or diversity – were held not only on paper and in public parlance, but also in brick and stone.<sup>26</sup> This article aims to explore the ideological roles of the Zemun Bridge as a conspicuously vivid example of the instrumentality of the ideological triad of Yugoslav primordialism, syncretism and supra-ethnic universalism. However, the aim is not merely to examine this particular piece of architecture and engineering in terms of its ideological relevance, but to point to a broader phenomenon of architectural culture as being constitutive both to identity-building processes and the symbolic spheres of social life. Specifically useful here is Jeremy F. Walton's thesis about infrastructural politics of space, by which architecture can be interpreted as an infrastructure, a nexus for 'spatial practice' and object of 'discursive practice'.<sup>27</sup> In that sense, the Zemun Bridge can be seen as infrastructure, functioning on both the utilitarian and symbolic level.

The Zemun Bridge will also be seen from an interpretive perspective in which public architecture, official buildings, and the urban design of official places are ingredients of the establishment of political legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> Together with its urban settings and the Sava River, however, the bridge was not a mere representation of political ideas but rather a 'political space' in the sense that Eldman Murray speaks of the visual culture as a constitutive element of political reality.<sup>29</sup> This article will show how the 'political space' of the bridge negotiated national identity as multifaceted and shifting in relation to the major paradigms of Yugoslavism, ultimately testifying that the Yugoslav elites never succeeded in developing a consistent national ideology.<sup>30</sup> Yet the broader relevance of this piece of architecture and engineering lies in the understanding of the relationship between visual culture, built environment and politics, where architecture shaped ideologies as much as it disclosed the tensions, discontents and conflicts over political power and identity in the context of rising authoritarianism not only in the Balkans but elsewhere in Europe.<sup>31</sup>

### Rejoining the Dismembered, Disjoining the Unified

Like any other structure that facilitates crossing from one river bank to another, the Zemun Bridge physically connected peoples and territories. In the new political context, in which Belgrade lost its position of a military frontier town and became the capital of Yugoslavia, the Sava River suddenly lost its liminal status. By flowing freely through a unified country, from the Julian Alps to its confluence to the Danube, across the territories that had been under the rule of Austro-Hungary, the Sava epitomised the recently accomplished South Slavs' political unification. The act of spanning the river paralleled the official annexation of the former Austro-Hungarian territories of Zemun and Pančevo into a new administrative unit of Metropolitan Belgrade.<sup>32</sup> In March 1934, only a few months before the construction works were completed, the communal independence of the city of Zemun was officially disbanded and this ex-Habsburg, predominantly Catholic town became administratively part of

<sup>26</sup> See: Aleksandar Ignjatović, 'Architecture, Urban Development, and the Yugoslavization of Belgrade, 1850–1941', *Centropa*, 9, 2 (2009), 110–26; Ignjatović, *Jugoslovenstvo*.

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy F. Walton, 'Architectures of interreligious tolerance: The infrastructural politics of place and space in Croatia and Turkey', *New Diversities*, 17, 2 (2015), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Mikenberg, 'Introduction'.

<sup>29</sup> Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Nielsen, *Yugoslavs*, 152.

<sup>31</sup> Useful here is: Bernd J. Fischer Nielsen, ed., *Balkan Strongmen: Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of South Eastern Europe* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> For details about the construction see: 'Konkurs za projekat novog mosta Beograd-Zemun', *Vreme*, 19 May 1929; A. A., 'Gradjenje mosta Kralja Aleksandra I i puta Beograd-Zemun', *Politika*, 10 April 1930; 'Radovi na Zemunskom mostu Kralja Aleksandra I', *Politika*, 24 July 1931.



the Yugoslav capital,<sup>33</sup> which had already been drafted in the general plan of Belgrade in 1923,<sup>34</sup> aiming at ‘reaching an image of the monumental metropolis’ (Figure 1).<sup>35</sup>

The position of the bridge in the symbolic topography of Yugoslavism was particularly telling. First, the crossing of the Sava River resonated tremendously in the political milieu of a newly regionalised country, which, even after the Royal Dictatorship (1929–1931), remained centralised despite the fact that it was administratively divided into nine provinces, or banates (*banovine*), almost all of which were named after major Yugoslav rivers. The new regional units, aimed at replacing the old historical entities, were deliberately imposed to decentralise the country and build a more homogeneous nation. Nevertheless, out of nine banates six were dominated by Serbs.<sup>36</sup> A symbolic role of this new order was given to architecture as several massive seats of banates were designed or constructed in the early 1930s.<sup>37</sup> By spanning the historical border, the bridge ambivalently symbolised the official narrative of uniting the ‘Western parts of the vast and harmonious Yugoslavia with the Eastern regions’<sup>38</sup> and, more clandestinely, finally achieved the project of Serbian national unification and territorial encompassment. Thus, the construction was simultaneously seen as a symbol of Yugoslav unification and a link between ‘Serbian’ territories, materialising the ideological ambiguity of Yugoslavism.<sup>39</sup>

Although the first initiative to construct the bridge commenced in the early 1920s, an international competition was organised. This happened in a politically crucial moment of the Royal Dictatorship, on a tidal wave of the regime’s engagement with modern architecture as an ideological narrative of ‘national oneness’. With its aura of progressivism and supra-national meanings, as well as disinterest in historicism, modern architecture played a crucial role in the official representative culture of the Royal Dictatorship.<sup>40</sup> The winning entry for the bridge was done by the company *Batignolles* with a project of a suspended iron bridge. The works started the next year, in 1930, when the French were joined by the German concern *Gutehoffnungshütte*, which was responsible for the iron construction of the bridge because none of the Yugoslav companies were able to undertake such a laborious, technically demanding task.<sup>41</sup>

As soon as the works commenced, the whole enterprise acquired a distinctive ideological aura and became a useful tool of political propaganda. The contemporaries saw the construction as a virtual

<sup>33</sup> According to the 1910 census, Zemun was predominantly Catholic, populated by Germans (38 per cent), Croats (13 per cent) and Hungarians (12 per cent), while Serbs counted for 33 per cent of the city’s population. In the interwar period Zemun kept its Catholic majority. See: Damir Matanović, ‘Etnička i vjerska slika Srijema 1880–1910’, *Povijesni zbornik*, 3, 4 (2009), 191; Györe Zoltán, Pfeiffer Attila, ‘Osnovne demografske odlike Ugarske prema popisu stanovništva iz 1910. godine’, *Godišnjak Filozofskog fakulteta u Novom Sadu*, XLII, 2 (2017), 103. Tanja D. Conley incorrectly states that prior to the war 70 per cent of Zemun’s population was Croatian: Conley, *Architectures*, 105. On the administrative merging of Belgrade and Zemun in 1934 see: ‘Poslednja odborska sednica Gradskog odbora u Zemunu: Pred spajanje Beograda i Zemuna u jednu opštinu’, *Politika*, 28 March 1934.

<sup>34</sup> Mirjana Roter-Blagojević and Marta Vukotić Lazar, ‘The 1923 Belgrade Master Plan – Historic Town Modernization’, *Planning Perspectives*, 14 (2017), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Conley, *Architectures*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Nielsen, *Yugoslavs*, 102.

<sup>37</sup> The seats of banates were designed for the Vardar Banate (Skopje), the Vrbas Banate (Banja Luka), the Danube Banate (Novi Sad), the Morava Banate (Niš), the Zeta Banate (Cetinje) and the Littoral Banate (Split): see: Ignjatović, *Jugoslovenstvo*, 383–98.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Most Viteškog Kralja Aleksandra I Ujedinitelja svečano je osvećen i predat saobraćaju’, *Beogradske opštinske novine*, 53, 12 (1934), 862.

<sup>39</sup> Nielsen, *Yugoslavs*, 248. On the ideological ambiguity of interwar Yugoslavism see: Djokić, *Elusive Compromise*; Rusinow, ‘Idea’, 20–1; Kosta St. Pavlowitch, ‘The First World War and the Unification of Yugoslavia’, in Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Ignjatović, *Jugoslovenstvo*, 231–306.

<sup>41</sup> See: ‘Konkurs za projekat’, A. A., ‘Pitanje gradjenja mosta Beograd-Zemun rešeno. Radovi su ustupljeni francuskom društvu Batignolles i nemačkom preduzeću Gutehoffnungshütte’, *Vreme*, 10 April 1930; ‘Gradjenje mosta Kralja Aleksandra I i puta Beograd-Zemun’, *Politika*, 10 April 1930. The construction works were conducted by the French engineer Dominique Gastaldi, famous for building iron bridges at the time. See: ‘Radovi na Zemunskom mostu’. In the early 1930s, the construction industry was among the most profitable employers in Yugoslavia, attracting foreign capital; see: Conley, *Architectures*, 89–90.



Figure 1. View of the Bridge of King Alexander I from Zemun. Contemporary postcard, author's collection.

embodiment of the 'recently unified Yugoslav nation which had been forcefully separated by the Danube and Sava for centuries'.<sup>42</sup> The pro-regime Belgrade press reiterated the notion of the bridge representing a final historical stage of Yugoslav unification, creating a sense of a virtually ongoing accomplishment in the eyes of the spectators. 'The colossal bridge that will, once and for all, connect Serbia with Srem [Srijem] and all other regions', read the pro-regime Belgrade newspaper *Politika*, 'is now being erected as a token of gratitude for all those who wrote our history with their own blood'.<sup>43</sup> The construction of the bridge emphatically referred to the construction of 'integral Yugoslavia', acted as a completion of the political project of unifying South Slavs, peoples of the 'same ethnic origins and shared national ideals',<sup>44</sup> but also to the territorial linking of Serbs with their 'national' areas to the north. Indeed, the bridge palpably materialised what the regime saw as the ultimate 'victory over bogus boundaries' artificially imposed on South Slavs in the past. By building the bridge, a need to 'defeat natural obstacles in order to bring about and attain the economic and cultural development of Yugoslavia has been finally achieved', wrote the newly inaugurated Minister of Construction Stevan Savković in 1929.<sup>45</sup>

As the construction went on, the bridge's place in the public discourse became more complex, because it referred to both Yugoslav primordialism and syncretism, simultaneously symbolising what was seen as the re-unification of Yugoslavs and the unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Consequently, the construction stood for a re-collected national body and, rather perilously, personified the Yugoslav whole which was being united but also kept dismembered by the constant mentioning of different ethnic groups and their respective territorial domains even if recently united. Here, Jeremy F. Walton's idea of 'textured historicity' in the context of the ambivalence of imperial legacies,

<sup>42</sup> 'Most Viteškog Kralja', 862.

<sup>43</sup> I. Trifunović, 'Zašto baš lavovi?', *Politika*, 14 March 1933.

<sup>44</sup> 'Most Viteškog Kralja', 866–7.

<sup>45</sup> Reports sent to the President of the Council of Ministers, the army general Petar Živković: AJ, Ministarstvo gradjevina, F. 62, f. 1234.

which defines the encounter between the present and the ‘objects that convey the past in the present’, can serve as a useful lens.<sup>46</sup> The separated identities of South Slavs were the product of the imperial past, so it was the afterlife of the Habsburg Empire which was constantly reshaping the Yugoslav present. The shadow of the despised empire always loomed on the horizon of ‘national oneness’.

Interestingly, the same ideological ambiguity took shape in the symbolism of the Sava River, the major West-East transit route of the country physically linking three national capitals: Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade. One can even assume that the river’s already developed fluvial symbolism and its ‘historical enterprise of merging people into an uncompromising whole’<sup>47</sup> were only appropriated by the iron construction that stood above it. Curiously enough, the river and the bridge altogether represented both the single inner core and demarcation line of South Slavic identities, epitomising the dichotomy that sharply marked the interwar discourse of Yugoslavism.

Yet the bridge also acquired a special role of representing the policy of Yugoslavia’s modernisation. The regime propaganda referred to it as an ‘outstanding proof of our intellectual and cultural development’.<sup>48</sup> If one excludes a few conservatives who remonstrated against the ‘gigantic iron eyesore’ and its detrimental visual impact on the city,<sup>49</sup> both Serbs and Croats unanimously shared the same opinion. While, for example, the Minister of Construction, Stjepan Srkulj – the renowned Croatian historian who managed to remain in the position for six consecutive governments, from early 1932 to 1935 – praised the bridge for its ‘prime cultural excellence’ and a considerable ‘ability to witness our technical competence’, the mayor of Belgrade, Milutin Petrović, believed that the new construction testified to the country’s ‘cultural and economic elevation to a higher level of development’.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the bridge received paeans from architects and engineers who admired its elegant and modern lines.<sup>51</sup> An account by Djordje Lazarević, one of the most remarkable Yugoslav engineers of the time, was particularly convincing. He employed the rhetorical device of contrast, stressing the superiority of the present over the past: ‘This bridge stacks silhouetted against Belgrade’s modern skyline’, wrote Lazarević, ascertaining that there ‘has not been fifty years since the silhouette of the then provincial town appeared utterly Oriental. The original character is still reflected in the city walls and the cathedral’, he continued, ‘but it is now complemented by a thin silhouette of the catenary bridge as proof of [our] progress’ (Figure 2).<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the meanings of the bridge were complemented by referring to political power, which was observed by many contemporaries, including the engineer Lazarević who spoke about bridges being ‘far better symbols of state power than any other [type of] construction’.<sup>53</sup> The Zemun Bridge indeed represented an idiosyncratic example of the political aura of many similar examples of the period – from the daring bridges by Robert Maillart in France and Switzerland, to Eugène Freyssinet’s prestressed concrete structures and numerous grand bridges in Germany, many of which were built as ‘political monuments rather than works of structural engineering art’.<sup>54</sup> The Belgrade case

<sup>46</sup> Jeremy F. Walton, ‘Textured Historicity and the Ambivalence of Imperial Legacies’, *History and Anthropology*, 30 (2019), 357.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Most Viteškog Kralja’, 867.

<sup>48</sup> P. Cerović, ‘Da li su lavovi tuđinski simboli?’, *Politika*, 15 March 1933.

<sup>49</sup> The unsigned memorandum for the Ministry of Infrastructure dated 17 July 1929 in: AJ, Ministarstvo gradjevina, F. 62, f. 1234.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Most Viteškog Kralja’, 866.

<sup>51</sup> Sabo Jelić, ‘Inženjerska estetika – Zemunski most’, *Srpski književni glasnik*, 42, 2 (1934), 564–9; Djurdje Bošković, ‘Most Beograd-Zemun’, *Srpski književni glasnik*, 44, 1 (1935), 70–1.

<sup>52</sup> Similar appreciation was expressed by Miša Manojlović and Rajko Tatić, the Belgrade architects and declared modernists who also thought that decorating a modern bridge was not even worth considering: ‘Prvo treba rešiti urbanistički problem i raščistiti prilaz Zemunskom mostu, pa ga tek onda ukrašavati’, *Pravda*, 10 March 1934.

<sup>53</sup> Djordje Lazarević, ‘Nekoliko zapažanja o mostovima danas’, *Umetnički pregled*, 3, 1 (1939), 21–3.

<sup>54</sup> Christian Menn, *Prestressed Concrete Bridges* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1990), 20. See: Hagen and Ostergren, *Building*; David P. Billington, *Robert Maillart Bridges: The Art of Engineering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Kristen Ellen Finnegan, *Engineering Aesthetics: Suspension Bridges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).



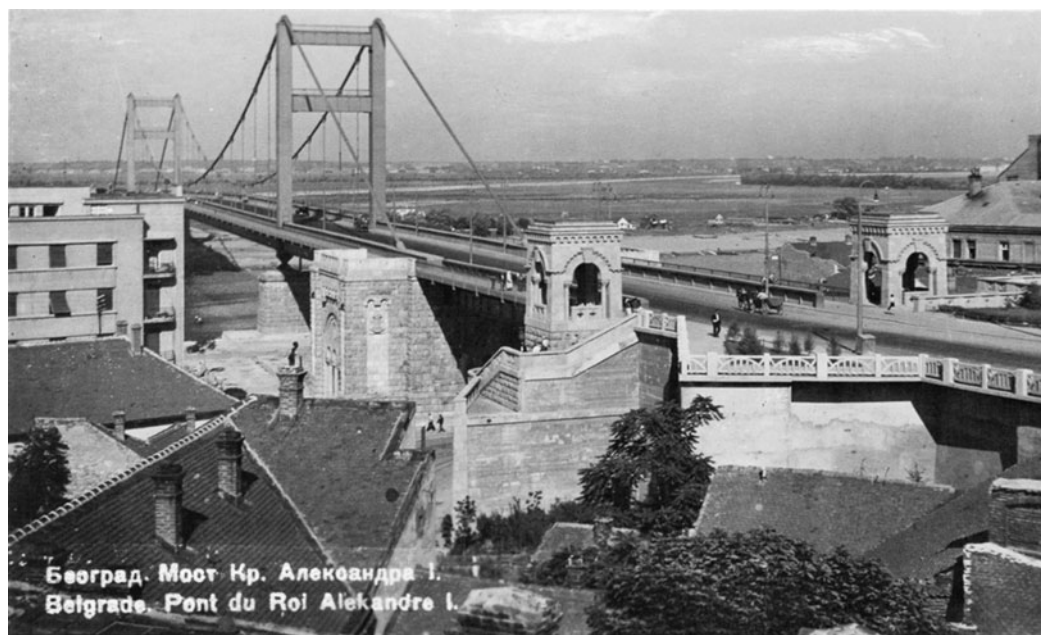


Figure 2. View of the Bridge of King Alexander I from Belgrade. Contemporary postcard, author's collection.

emphatically testified to the fact that monumental bridge structures of the 1930s literally cemented claims of authoritarian governments as efficient and powerful regimes.<sup>55</sup> The modern iron construction acted simultaneously as a form of legitimising political power and professional prowess in the context of architects and engineers working in the gaping divide between the already existing 'traditionalists' and 'modernists' in Serbian architectural culture.<sup>56</sup> In this perspective, the bridge was instrumental to Yugoslav universalism, thematising the rift between historicity and modernity, which corresponded to broader anxieties concerning the national question in Yugoslavia. In her seminal study on interwar Belgrade, Jovana Babović has shown that defining parameters of unified national culture also included the consumption and performance of those cultural practices which were interpreted as a 'symbol of European metropolitan modernity', not necessarily national values.<sup>57</sup> However, her argument that class relations and the defense of bourgeois values played a more important role in interwar Belgrade urban society than national identity is only partially relevant to the study of modern architecture, which operated in the intersection of the national, transnational and supranational. Nor can Yugoslav universalism be comprehended through the theoretical lenses of 'imagined noncommunities' set by Tara Zahra.<sup>58</sup> The supra-national Yugoslavism, as embodied by modern architecture in interwar Belgrade, cannot be understood as a product of the nationally indifferent 'who remained altogether aloof to the nation's appeal',<sup>59</sup> but rather as a purposely imposed identity-building strategy which complemented the highly ethnicised rhetoric in the political discourse of the 1930s.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Vahrenkamp, *The German Autobahn 1920–1945* (Lohmar-Köln: Josef Eul Verlag, 2010), 185.

<sup>56</sup> On the clash between the 'historic/modern paradigms' in Belgrade's architectural culture see: Blagojević, *Modernism*, 140; cf. 57–62.

<sup>57</sup> Jovana Babović, *Metropolitan Belgrade: Culture and Class in Interwar Yugoslavia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>58</sup> Tara Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis', *Slavic Review*, 69, 1 (2010), 93–119.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

### Architectural Rhetoric of a National Synthesis

The intractable problem of Yugoslav national unity, locked in the throes of opposing forces of uniformity and diversity, was manifested in various ideas as to how to enrich the modern, austere iron bridge. After a series of different proposals, the final solution was a hybrid of the slender, iron catenary construction and the historicist supporting elements made of robust stone. Five river-bank piers, onto which the deck of the bridge was laid and its superstructure erected, were designed by Nikolai Nikolaevich Krasnov, the Russian architect-immigrant who was the most eminent figure of the Architectural Department of the Ministry of Construction.<sup>60</sup> The architectural rhetoric of the piers, which Krasnov designed between 1929 and 1933, leaves no doubt that their style was chosen advisedly. The contemporaries dubbed its eclectic character the 'Romanesque-Byzantine Style', distinguished by an unorthodox combination of various Romanesque- and Byzantine style-like elements.<sup>61</sup> Apparently, some were Romanesque in character while others were broadly Byzantine in inspiration. In fact, this particular mixture of different medievalising motives was not a mere architectural whim. In a context where the 'question of style played a persuasive role in anticipating an image of the majestic capital',<sup>62</sup> the ideological economy of this strange stylistic concoction was far from being apolitical. In Yugoslav interwar architecture, the Romanesque Style was commonly associated with Catholics (Croats and Slovenes), while the Byzantine Style was routinely linked to Serbs as Christian Orthodox. This is the reason why the mixture of different 'Byzantine' and 'Romanesque' elements functioned exactly the way Yugoslav syncretism operated. This visual idiom did not only symbolise the historical role of Yugoslavs, commonly perceived as a bridge between two great European cultures,<sup>63</sup> but also a unity of the nation which would, and indeed should, represent a coherent, monolithic whole, albeit made of different facets (Figure 3).

Such a politics of identity distinguished the state's representative culture. For instance, the official coat of arms, composed of the traditional symbols of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, was conceived according to a syncretic paradigm, along with the Yugoslav hymn, compiled as a combination of three national anthems. The use of both Latin and Cyrillic scripts was advisable and the official state language, which was oddly authorised by the 1921 and 1931 constitutions as 'Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian', followed the same composite logic. Even the king's three sons were given typical Serbian, Croatian and Slovene personal names (Peter, Tomislav and Andrej) to symbolise the three Yugoslav 'tribes' and their indissoluble unity.

In the early 1930s, after reintroducing parliamentary system of government, the syncretic paradigm of national identity gained special prominence. Many political slogans about 'merging three tribes and their traditions' constantly reiterated the same ideological precept while addressing the meaning of the bridge.<sup>64</sup> Not unlike the bridge's overall symbolism, the conceptual duality of the 'Romanesque-Byzantine' architectural style underlined the ambivalence of Yugoslavism in its referring to a single national idea and particular national identities at the same time.

Questions about which kind of stone would be suitable for the construction shed another light on the bridge's meanings. Not only did the mechanical quality and aesthetic appearance of the stone matter, but also the geographical location of a quarry. Among several possibilities, which included rocks taken from quarries in Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia, the limestone from Bele Vode near Kruševac some 200 km south of Belgrade was considered the best building material.<sup>65</sup> The decision was made in spite of the opinions of the special State Committee which was set up by the Ministry of Construction in

<sup>60</sup> Widely known as the 'court architect', he was in charge of designing a whole series of state-sponsored projects in Belgrade and across the country.

<sup>61</sup> M. R., 'Da li će se na Zemunskom mostu postaviti Konjanici g. Ivana Meštrovića za koje bi imalo da se plati 22 miliona dinara', *Pravda*, 3 March 1934; 'Prvo treba rešiti'; Bošković, 'Most', 70–1.

<sup>62</sup> Conley, *Architectures*, 93.

<sup>63</sup> On this topic see: Tanja Zimmermann, *Der Balkan zwischen Ost und West: Mediale Bilder und kulturpolitische Prägungen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2014), 1–24.

<sup>64</sup> 'Novim putevima', *Jugosloven*, 1 (1931), 2.

<sup>65</sup> The polemic is well documented in archival documents; see: AF, Ministarstvo gradjevina, F. 62, f. 1149, f. 1238.



Figure 3. South pier of the Bridge of King Alexander I. Photograph by author.

order to resolve the question. ‘Our assessment of the stone from Bele Vode’, wrote its president, architect Petar Bajalović, ‘is that its delicate and pale colour [not only] contradicts a rather powerful and robust character of the bridge portals’, but also the requested air pollution tolerance characteristics.<sup>66</sup> Instead of using darker and more resistant material, such as the coarse-grained, dun gabbro from Jablanica in Bosnia, which was recommended by the majority of the Committee members, the final decision fell on the yellowish limestone from Serbia. It seems that the arguments concerning the ‘national’ origins of the rock finally overrode both structural and aesthetic criteria.

However, there was more to the ideological relevance of the bridge and its ‘Romanesque-Byzantine’ decoration and the materialisation. For the faux-medieval style also functioned in the context of the bridge exuding an aura of modernity, which closely corresponded to the symbolic representation of Yugoslavia as a progressive, modern country. Many contemporaries emphasised a sharp contrast between the eclectic historicism of the stone piers and the cutting-edge design of the suspended iron bridge, which also functioned as a powerful rhetorical device. For example, the Serbian painter and professor Branko Popović criticised the ‘filigree patterns of the Romanesque-Byzantine Style grafted on such a mighty piece of engineering’.<sup>67</sup> The architectural historian Djurdje Bošković took a similar stance towards what he ironically called the ‘Iron-Byzantine Style’, pinpointing the aesthetic-ethical dichotomy of the ‘puny, pale, frail and degenerate Byzantine ornaments’ and the ‘massive, great and powerful construction which rests upon them’.<sup>68</sup> While some civil engineers widely shared the same interpretive trope,<sup>69</sup> the most prolific and popular among mainstream Belgrade architects, Dragiša Brašovan, spoke about the ‘sheer nonsense of having a modern construction supported by the medieval-styled piers’.<sup>70</sup>

But it was exactly this nonsense which was crucial for the perception of the bridge and the power of its ideological messages. On the one hand, the historicist architecture reinforced a principal idea of

<sup>66</sup> AJ, Ministarstvo gradjevina, F. 62, f. 1149.

<sup>67</sup> Branko Popović, ‘Zašto je nemoguće izvesti Meštrovićev dekorativni projekat za Zemunski most’, *Politika*, 22 March 1934.

<sup>68</sup> Bošković, ‘Most’, 71.

<sup>69</sup> Lazarević, ‘Nekoliko’, 22.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Prvo treba rešiti’.

Yugoslavism – regardless of its different variants – which was to imagine a national identity anchored in a deep, medieval past. In this view, the bridge referred to the coveted, shared past of the nation symbolised by the Romanesque and Byzantine architecture. Apart from representing a symbiosis of modernism and monumentalism typical of the European architecture in the 1930s, the stylistic merging obviously referred to the Yugoslav political and cultural ‘re-unification’. Nevertheless, it also underlined the intrinsic difference of particular national histories and identities, consequently provoking a sense of uncertainty and anxiety in the context where contemporaneous artistic conventions attributed cultural values to certain styles and forms.

The dialectical coupling of the medievalist architectural forms and modern iron construction had another, equally generative, role in the identity formation process, as many contemporaries pointed out. The bridge was to represent the Yugoslav project as the embodiment of modernity and progress, which was conditioned on resolving the deadlocks of the past. In this perspective, having the medieval-styled piers which lay beneath the modern iron superstructure was to visualise the nation’s ‘pedagogical’ layer both as a condition of its ‘performative’ modernity – to use Homi K. Bhabha’s terms – and the experience which needed to be transcended rather than simply negated.<sup>71</sup> In line with the Benjaminian notion of architectural modernity as a ‘drastic change in the structure of experience’,<sup>72</sup> the bridge visualised a temporal rupture of the old-new nation and operated as a visual trope of Yugoslav universalism.

### Winged Horsemen, Multiple Identities

In late 1933, the city authorities came up with a new idea for decorating the iron bridge, aiming to embellish the modern, iron construction in order both to harmonise with the historical urban core and to become more explicit in terms of their ideological statement.<sup>73</sup> The task was given to one of the most celebrated sculptors of the time, Ivan Meštrović, who proposed an arresting, rather provocative idea of how to reimagine the identity of the bridge. The choice of the artist was certainly not an accident. While in his early years Meštrović established himself as a kind of Yugoslav prophet due to his famous *Vidovdan Temple* (or *Kosovo Temple*, 1908–13), the most fundamental artwork associated with the Yugoslav nation-building project.<sup>74</sup> But his enthusiasm for the Yugoslav idea, which reached its peak on the eve of the First World War, faded as the Belgrade regime displayed rigidity in establishing a blatantly authoritarian, centralised rule and pro-Serbian politics.<sup>75</sup> However, he kept close ties with the royal family and several Belgrade politicians who continued to support his monumental projects.

As a hallmark of the bridge Meštrović proposed four colossal sculptures to be erected directly onto the ‘Romanesque-Byzantine’ piers, two on each river bank. The 10-metre-high statues represented four historical characters sitting on winged horses, highly elevated over the bridge by the slender double-columned, 22-metre-high pedestals.<sup>76</sup> The statues were arranged in pairs. On the east bank would stand two famous medieval rulers who epitomised the glorious days of the Croatian and Serbian past: King Tomislav, the first Croatian king (910–28), and Emperor Dušan, the most celebrated

<sup>71</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), 139–70.

<sup>72</sup> Hilde Heynen, ‘Walter Benjamin: The Dream of a Classless Society’, in Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 100.

<sup>73</sup> Ignjatović, *Jugoslovenstvo*, 361–7.

<sup>74</sup> Aleksandar Ignjatović, ‘Images of the Nation Foreseen: Ivan Meštrović’s Vidovdan Temple and Primordial Yugoslavism’, *Slavic Review* 73, 4 (2014), 828–58; Andrew B. Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 54–59, 110–2.

<sup>75</sup> On Meštrović’s political engagement see: Vinko Srhoj, ‘Ivan Meštrović i politika kao prostorahistorijskog idealizma’, *Ars Adriatica*, 4 (2014), 369–84; Norka Machiedo Mladinić, ‘Političko opredjeljenje i umjetnički rad mladog Meštrovića’, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, 41, 1 (2007), 143–70; Norka Machiedo Mladinić, ‘Prilog proučavanju djelovanja Ivana Meštrovića u Jugoslavenskom odboru’, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, 39, 1 (2007), 133–55.

<sup>76</sup> Some drafts show that he put wings to horses and horsemen alternatively.

Serbian ruler (1331–55). The west bank was reserved for two ‘Yugoslav’ rulers, one from medieval, another from recent history: Bosnian King Tvrtko I Kotromanić (1353–91) and King Alexander’s father, Peter I Karadjordjević (1904–21), the last ruler of the Kingdom of Serbia who became the first king of the new South Slavic state in 1918. Four years later, Meštrović’s student, Antun Augustinčić, erected a similarly idiosyncratic arrangement on a medieval bridge in Skopje, with grand equestrian statues of the Karadjordjević kings.<sup>77</sup> Seen in a wider European context of the 1930s, however, these cases did not represent a curiosity. Among other examples of the sculptural decoration of bridges aiming to convey particular ideological messages, the most notable one was a project for the Nibelungen Bridge in Linz (1938), embellished with gigantic statues of German mythical heroes.<sup>78</sup>

Meštrović’s idea, supported by the king who personally monitored and verified the plans and stressed both the aesthetics and political symbolism of the bridge,<sup>79</sup> challenged the austerity of the iron construction and the symbolism of national uniformity.<sup>80</sup> According to the design, the idea of the first pair of sculptures (King Peter paired with his historical ‘predecessor’, King Tvrtko, whom some historians considered the very first ‘Yugoslav’ king) closely corresponded to the major tenets of primordial Yugoslavism. These historical characters personified two Yugoslavias – the first one from the Middle Ages and the recently ‘re-united’ one – which Meštrović complemented by the second pair of sculptures on the opposite river bank, whose meaning was rather different. These were the figural representations of Emperor Dušan and King Tomislav, the most illustrious Serbian and Croatian medieval rulers, paired to represent the shared but separated national histories. Meštrović’s identity-rendering of the bridge was rather ambiguous because it reinforced the particularities of Serbs and Croats simultaneously, referring to a Serbo-Croatian unity but also to their separate histories (Figure 4).

Meštrović placed what he impartially called the four ‘heroes of the national past’<sup>81</sup> onto high-reaching, paired slender columns, topped with single medievalising imposts deliberately styled to match the eclecticism of Krasnov’s already constructed piers.<sup>82</sup> The consequently created architectural-sculptural whole contributed to the semiotic complexity of the entire construction. For, the proposed sculptural arrangement did not just negotiate Yugoslav primordialism and syncretism but opened up the Pandora’s Box of clandestine Serbian and Croatian nationalisms. Although the subtle nationalist readings of the bridge had already been evoked in the public discourse – as, for example, when the contemporaries spoke of linking the administratively non-existing ‘Serbia’ with the rest of the country<sup>83</sup> – Meštrović’s own interpretation remained most controversial. He declared that the ‘bridge will connect the territories of our two principal regions, Serbia and Croatia’,<sup>84</sup> assuming that the predominantly Catholic Zemun belonged to a ‘Croatian’ part of the country. This statement filled the Belgrade public discourse with consternation and alarm. The act of territorial division of the recently united country, even if only rhetorical, was comprehended not simply as a personal commitment, but also in the context of the ongoing Serbo-Croatian political arguments. In the mid-1930s, the tensions associated with territorial disputes had shown no signs of abating until Banovina Croatia, an autonomous province with Zagreb as its capital, was established in 1939.<sup>85</sup> In

<sup>77</sup> See: Vladimir Mitrović, ‘Dinastički spomenici u Kraljevini SHS/Jugoslaviji (1919–1941)’, available at <https://graditeljins.wordpress.com/2015/09/15/dinastički-spomenici-u-kraljevini-shs-jugoslaviji-1919-1941/> (last visited 19 Jan. 2022)

<sup>78</sup> Hagen and Ostergren, *Building*, 94.

<sup>79</sup> The king’s signatures can still be seen on several architectural drawings which are kept in: AJ, Ministarstvo gradjevina, F. 62, f. 601. See also Meštrović’s account in his memoirs: Ivan Meštrović, *Uspomene na političke ljude i događaje* (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, 1969), 216.

<sup>80</sup> Meštrović, *Uspomene*, 199.

<sup>81</sup> Ivan Čurčin, ed., *Meštrović* (Zagreb: Nova Evropa, 1933), CXV.

<sup>82</sup> Uglješa Rajčević, ‘Konjanici za Most kralja Aleksandra I u Beogradu’, *Godišnjak grada Beograda*, 34 (1987), 210; Žarko Vidović, *Ivan Meštrović i sukob skulptora s arhitektom* (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1961), 245.

<sup>83</sup> Ilija Ž. Trifunović, ‘Zašto baš lavovi?’, *Politika*, 14 March 1933.

<sup>84</sup> Čurčin, *Meštrović*, CXV.

<sup>85</sup> Before the Serbo-Croatian compromise was reached, Meštrović had been among a group of (mainly) Croatian intellectuals who signed a petition aiming at political and administrative decentralisation of the country in proportion to ethnic



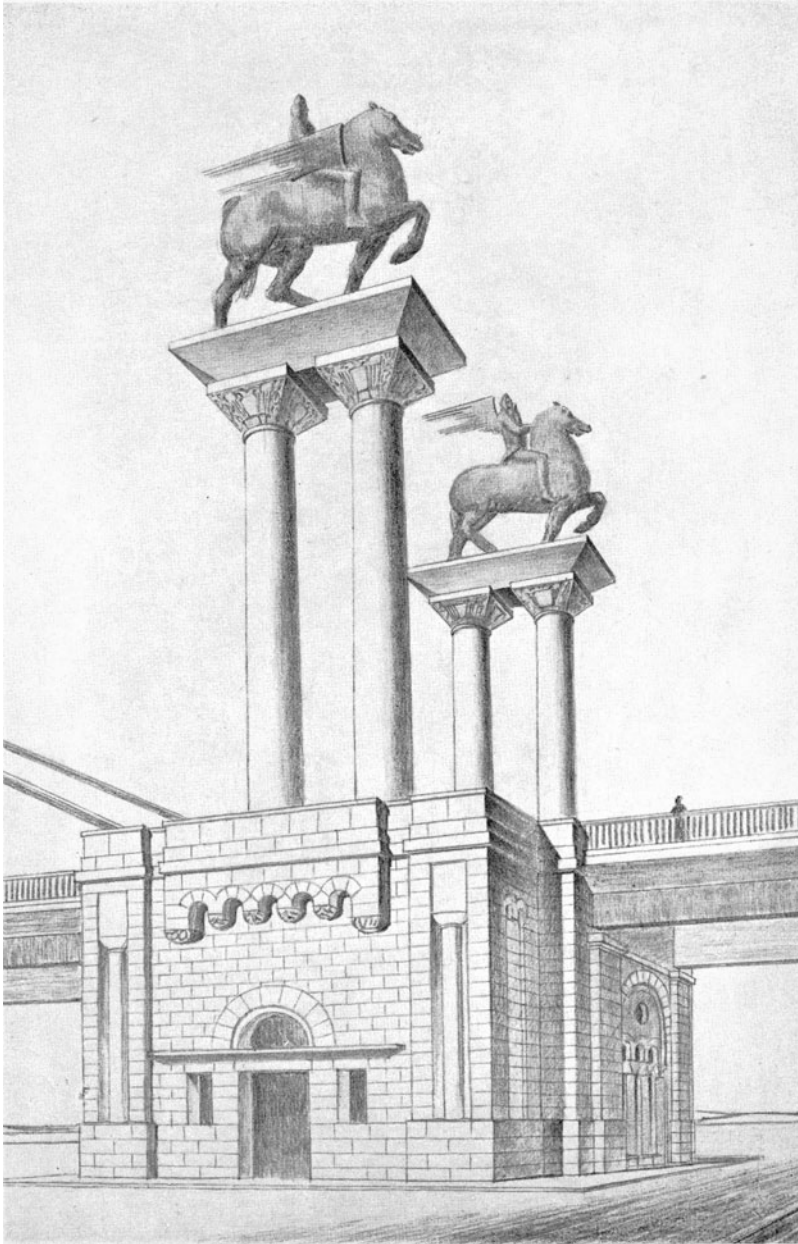


Figure 4. Ivan Meštrović's sketch of two equestrian statues. Ivan Ćurčin, ed., *Meštrović* (Zagreb: Nova Evropa, 1933), CXV.

this respect, the overall meaning of the bridge, as reflected in the mirror of Meštrović's designs and explanations, simultaneously encouraged and challenged two – both competing and complementary

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and historical criteria. This program was outlined as 'A compromise needed for the Yugoslav re-composition', with three regions of mainly ethno-historical status (Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia) and two separated territories of compound ethnic identity (Bosnia and Vojvodina). The programme was integrally published in the Zagreb periodical *Nova Evropa* (New Europe). See: Albert Bazala, Milan Ćurčin, Milivoj Dežma, Joza Kljaković, Ivan Meštrović et al., 'Jedan prijedlog za Nact Ustava', *Nova Evropa* 30, 7–8 (1937), 228–30.

– visions of Yugoslavism, as well as Serbian and Croatian nationalism. In a certain way, the sculpted historical characters can be comprehended as part of the continuous and ongoing discursive battle over territories pertaining to either the Serbian or Croatian nation. Nevertheless, at that time the battle was only symbolic, fought in the background of Yugoslavism which often – the case of the Zemun Bridge being no exception here – operated as a mask for competing national interests and aims.

### Raging Reactions: Aesthetics or Politics?

Having been published in the press, Meštrović's design promptly ignited a storm of protests in the capital. It was not only the visual unorthodoxy of the eccentric project, with its grotesque winged figures and gargantuan columns, but also the artist's own comments that provoked outrage in Belgrade, primarily due to Serbian nationalist perspectives. Although the manifest target of criticism was the government, because it commissioned both Krasnov and Meštrović without organising public and free competition, there was a range of other issues which soon became central to the polemic. Among the first to react was the Belgrade branch of the Yugoslav Association of Fine Arts, which excoriated the visual appearance of the bridge's decoration and denounced its authors. The president of the Association, Brašovan, had nothing but scorn for the piers and sculptures, stressing that they represented an eyesore, because the decoration, which was not in accordance with academic postulates, debased the modern iron construction.<sup>86</sup> One of the former devotees of Meštrović's pre-war works, the professor Branko Popović, took a paternalistic approach, giving lessons in morals to the artist and concluding that his design was both 'anti sculptural' and 'anti architectonic'.<sup>87</sup> The Association, Yugoslav by name only, consequently adopted a special resolution addressed to the highest state officials, calling for a ban on erecting what they termed an 'artistic fiasco'.<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, the Belgrade branch of the Association of Yugoslav Engineers and Architects took a similar initiative.<sup>89</sup> Their action was indicative of the same attitudes that characterised the artists' guild, but they acted more methodically and productively. The first meeting was dominated by the ubiquitous Brašovan, who abhorred Meštrović's idea by calling it 'too capricious'. He did his best to inculcate a sense of imminent danger as regards the 'architectural decoration of the bridge' which, by its sheer colossal size, would visually threaten and discredit the urban surroundings. On the same occasion, the dean of the Faculty of Technical Sciences disdained the project by calling it 'monstrous'.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, at the Association's yearly congress, held in Zagreb two months later in May 1934, the question of the Zemun Bridge was not even mentioned, let alone discussed.<sup>91</sup> The ensuing polemics resulted in a series of newspaper articles and interviews, only a few of which were written in Meštrović's favour, including the artist's own response.<sup>92</sup>

The protest meetings of Belgrade artists, architects and engineers also tackled the question of foreigners employed by the government, who had held important positions in various professional fields since the early 1920s. The Belgrade artists which, almost without dissent, supported modernism,

<sup>86</sup> M. R., 'Da li će se na Zemunskom mostu'.

<sup>87</sup> Popović, 'Zašto je nemoguće'.

<sup>88</sup> M. R., 'Da li će se na Zemunskom mostu'.

<sup>89</sup> 'Za postavljanje gigantskih stubova i skulptura g. Meštrovića na Zemunskom mostu trebalo bi izgraditi novu veštačku podlogu', *Vreme*, 17 March 1934.

<sup>90</sup> 'Prvo treba rešiti urbanistički problem i raščistiti prilaz Zemunskom mostu, pa ga tek onda ukrašavati', *Pravda*, 10 March 1934. Further meetings brought about an official memorandum of the Association containing three principal objections – the first was concerned with a 'stylistic discrepancy' between the iron bridge and its stone decoration; the second dealt with issues of traffic because the planned statues would make pedestrian lanes narrower; and the final one discussed the problematic handling of the finances; see: 'Ostvarenjem ove zamisli učinila bi se jedna znatna greška u smislu etetskome, tehničko-komunikativnom i finansijskom', *Pravda*, 17 March 1934; cf. 'Za postavljanje gigantskih stubova'.

<sup>91</sup> 'Zapisnik XV glavne godišnje Skupštine Udruženja jugoslovenskih inženjera i tehničara, održane 27. maja 1934. god. u Zagrebu', *Tehnički list*, 16, 17–18 (1934), 1.

<sup>92</sup> 'G. Ivan Meštrović odgovara Udruženju jugoslovenskih likovnih umetnika i Udruženju arhitekata', *Pravda*, 17 March 1934.

targeted primarily Russian émigrés, the sturdiest proponents of rigid academic historicism.<sup>93</sup> The engineers and architects, on the other hand, strongly disapproved of foreign skilled professionals and were ‘determined to continue and adopt more severe measures’, pursuing what had already been known as a ‘battle against foreigners’.<sup>94</sup> Their principal aim was to ‘get rid of numerous foreign engineers who had seriously threatened’ the accomplishment of ‘both professional and national objectives’.<sup>95</sup> This battle against foreigners was in fact a broader social and ideological phenomenon occurring in other ex-Habsburg multinational borderlands, as shown by Marco Bresciani in the case of Trieste, where the ‘offensive against foreigners’ took place in the 1920s.<sup>96</sup> Similarly to Italian fascism’s stance towards the Habsburg imperial legacy,<sup>97</sup> the Yugoslav regime relied on the division of the society into ‘us’ and ‘them’; the bridge served as a catalyst for this polarisation. But the sharp discontinuities between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Yugoslavia, the basis of many subsequent national historiographies, should be critically reexamined, because the Habsburg imperial legacy, as Claire Morelon has shown, largely shaped the cultural, social, economic and juridical life of all successor states.<sup>98</sup>

In interwar Yugoslavia, however, there were not monolithic attitudes toward foreigners but a more diverse range of viewpoints across various national camps. While the Zagreb Section of the Association of Yugoslav Engineers and Architects unabashedly criticised the lenient approach towards ‘imported’ skilled labour, their Belgrade compatriots’ stance on the issue was much more nuanced. Some of them supported the official state policy which granted foreign nationals the unconditional right of employment;<sup>99</sup> others tended to hamper the employment of foreigners altogether. There were also voices, mainly Serbian, which called for more stringent laws and a special treatment for Russian architects and civil engineers who, as part of more than 70,000 exiles, had flooded Yugoslavia escaping the Communist terror in the early 1920s.<sup>100</sup> From their standpoint, the Russians were Slavic brothers who should be treated differently from ‘those who had tortured and harassed us through centuries’ – namely, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians and Italians.<sup>101</sup>

In the interwar period, the Russian émigrés in Yugoslavia were important both practically and ideologically. Apart from providing skilled labour, the ‘Russian presence also served as a tool for promoting multiculturalism’, Tanja D. Conley has argued, stressing that the Russians acted as ‘a tool for emphasizing the pan-Slavic brotherhood’.<sup>102</sup> However, they were highly instrumental in helping not only to shape a useful image of Serbian national identity (versus Croatian), but also to challenge the boundaries of Yugoslavism. The Serbs shared the same language with the Croats, which the

<sup>93</sup> M. R., ‘Da li će se na Zemunskom mostu’.

<sup>94</sup> [Dimitrije] Jurišić, ‘Zapisnik sednice Gl. uprave U. J. I. A. održane 8. jula tek. godine u Beogradu’, *Tehnički list*, 5, 14 (1923), 112.

<sup>95</sup> Rajko Kušević, ‘Zapisnik V. Glavne redovne Skupštine Sekcije Zagreb Udruženja jugoslavenskih inženjera i arhitekata’, *Tehnički list*, 6, 7 (1924), 92. See also: ‘Rezolucija odbora za pitanje o zaštiti domaće industrije’, *Tehnički list*, 8, 16 (1926), 238.

<sup>96</sup> Marco Bresciani, ‘The Battle for Post-Habsburg Trieste/Trst: State Transition, Social Unrest, and Political Radicalism (1918–23)’, *Austrian History Yearbook*, 52 (2021), 184, 193–4.

<sup>97</sup> See: Mario Brasciani, ‘The Post-Imperial Space of the Upper Adriatic and the Post-War Ascent of Fascism’, in Tim Buchen and Frank Grelka, eds., *Akteure der Neuordnung: Ostmitteleuropa und das Erbe der Imperien, 1917–1924* (Berlin: epubli, 2016), 47–63.

<sup>98</sup> Claire Morelon, ‘Introduction’, in Paul Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 1–14. See also: Adam Kożuchowski, *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary: The Image of the Habsburg Monarchy in Interwar Europe* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2013).

<sup>99</sup> ‘Sastanak Sekcije Beograd’, *Tehnički list*, 11, 3 (1929), 50.

<sup>100</sup> A comprehensive study of the Russian émigrés in Yugoslavia and the Balkans is: Miroslav Jovanović, *Ruska emigracija na Balkanu, 1920–1930* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2006). Several synthetic works discuss the Russian architects in Yugoslavia: Aleksandar Kadujević, ‘Djelatnost ruskih arhitekata emigranata u Hrvatskoj i Jugoslaviji (1920–1980)’, *Prostor*, 26, 2 (2018), 309–18; Aleksandar Kadujević and Marina Djurdjević, ‘Russian Emigrant Architects in Yugoslavia (1918–1941)’, *Centropa*, 2 (2001), 139–48.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Godišnja Skupština Udruženja jugoslovenskih inženjera i arhitekata’, *Tehnički list*, 6, 17 (1924), 204.

<sup>102</sup> Conley, *Architectures*, 96.

proponents of Yugoslavism believed to represent a nation's more organic bond than religion. On the other hand, the more conservative Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church readily separated themselves from the Catholic Croats. They felt an intrinsic closeness with the Orthodox Russians, pointing to a shared religious and cultural background, including the ostensibly intrinsic skill of governing the state, which they considered a more fundamental sign of identity than the language. This parallelism between Serbs and Russians, which was often portrayed as an 'Orthodox brotherhood',<sup>103</sup> discursively justified Serbian exclusive claim to statecraft, which was one of the bones of contention between two major Yugoslav ethnic groups.

The fact that the Russian émigrés, employed in different ministries – the former tsarist architect Nikolay Krasnov being the most striking example<sup>104</sup> – were directly engaged in the construction of numerous historicist governmental buildings, banate seats and royal edifices is very indicative. The Russians virtually rebuilt Belgrade as the centre of political power, filling it with buildings fashioned exclusively in what was understood as the 'Russian-Imperial Style', symbolically supporting the matrix of identity politics in interwar Yugoslavia.<sup>105</sup> The pompous architectural transformation of Belgrade and the grandiloquent style of governmental buildings executed by imperial Russian architects shone the spotlight on the assumed identity not only of Belgrade as the capital of a centralised state, but also of the Serbs which should, and indeed did, again become an imperial nation.<sup>106</sup> This age-old trope of Serbian nationalism, veiled under the rhetoric of Yugoslavism, gives yet another clue as to how the public perception of the Zemun Bridge was locked in a power struggle between the competing forces of Serb centralism and Yugoslav federalism that deeply marked the 1930s.

However, the 'battle against foreigners' was only a side issue to a problem concerned with national sentiments of the bridge's principal decorator. And this seems to be a basic reason for raging reactions against his project. Meštrović, the once ardent supporter of South Slavic unification, acquired an infamous reputation of being a national renegade because he had been openly critical of the Serbian centralising tendencies in Yugoslavia. His idea to install the gigantic sculpture of the medieval Croatian ruler at the political and symbolic heart of a country in which Croatian 'historical rights' had no legitimacy whatsoever was considered anathema to the Serbian traditionalists. Yet the public outrage should not be understood only in terms of 'grumbling about the sculptures of Tvrtko and Tomislav', as Meštrović wrote in his memoirs,<sup>107</sup> suggesting that it seemed irreverent to have the statues of the famous Croatian ruler and the Catholic Bosnian king erected in the centre of Belgrade. What infuriated the Serbian faction over the competing meanings of the bridge (and indeed the national project it symbolised) was Meštrović's own interpretation in which Zemun and Srem were called Croatian territories (as a matter of fact, the town had been in Croatia-Slavonia within the

<sup>103</sup> See for instance: Jovanović, *Emigracija*, 246–9; Miodrag Sibinović, 'Ruska emigracija u srpskoj kulturi XX veka – značaj, okviri i perspektive proučavanja', in Miodrag Sibinović et al., eds., *Ruska emigracija u srpskoj kulturi XX veka*, vol. 1 (Belgrade: Filološki fakultet, 1994), 5.

<sup>104</sup> On the work of Nikolay Krasnov in Yugoslavia see: Željko Škalamera, 'Arhitekta Nikola Krasnov (1864–1939)', *Sveske Društva istoričara umetnosti Srbije*, VII, 14 (1983), 109–29; Aleksandar Kadijević, 'Prilog proučavanju dela arhitekta Nikole Krasnova u Jugoslaviji (1922–1939)', *Saopštenja*, 26 (1994), 184–90; Aleksandar Kadijević, 'Rad Nikolaja Krasnova u Ministarstvu građevina Kraljevine SHS/Jugoslavije u Beogradu od 1922. do 1939. godine', *Godišnjak grada Beograda*, 44 (1997), 221–55.

<sup>105</sup> On the representative architecture by the Russian émigrés see: Snežana Toševa, *Graditeljstvo u službi države: delatnost i ostvarenja Arhitektonskog odeljenja Ministarstva građevina u srpskoj arhitekturi 1918–1941* (Belgrade: Muzej nauke i tehnike, 2018); Snežana Toševa, 'Rad ruskih arhitekata u Ministarstvu građevina u periodu između dva svetska rata', *Godišnjak grada Beograda*, 51 (2004), 169–81; Marina Djurđević, 'Arhitekt Vasilij (Vilhelm) Fjodorovič Baumgarten', *Godišnjak grada Beograda*, 51 (2004), 183–90; Marina Djurđević, 'Prilog proučavanju delatnosti arhitekta Valerija Vladimiroviča Šaševskog u Beogradu', *Godišnjak grada Beograda*, 45–46 (1998–9), 151–70; Aleksandar Kadijević, 'Beogradski period rada arhitekta Viktora Viktoroviča Lukomskog (1920–1943)', *Godišnjak grada Beograda*, 45–46 (1998–9), 115–31.

<sup>106</sup> Aleksandar Ignjatović, 'Razlika u funkciji sličnosti: arhitektura ruskih emigranata u Srbiji između dva svetska rata i konstrukcija srpskog nacionalnog identiteta', *Tokovi istorije*, 1 (2011), 63–75.

<sup>107</sup> Meštrović, *Uspomene*, 199.

Habsburg Empire). This message of the sculptural decoration became more transparent when the Minister of Construction, the Croat Stjepan Srkulj, publicly announced his fondness for the design. The pro-regime press in Belgrade suggested that the minister upheld the idea not because of aesthetic but political reasons, which further drew attention to the ideological divide between the Serbian and Croatian sides.<sup>108</sup> The verbal belligerence and hostilities from the Serbian intellectual elite intensified in early 1934, when the sculptor started working on the gigantic Monument of the Unknown Yugoslav Soldier (1934–8) on Avala near Belgrade, itself an interesting example of interplay between various paradigms of Yugoslav identity.<sup>109</sup> A number of professional institutions from the capital carefully orchestrated assaults, primarily targeting not Meštrović's art but what they tendentiously called a disregard for Serbian traditions and history.<sup>110</sup> Meštrović's sculptural interpretation of national history, which astutely combined Primordialism, Syncretism and Universalism, had already been faced with severe criticism – firstly when the Serbian conservatives vehemently criticised his *Vidovdan Temple*, and secondly, when he sculpted a colossal male figure for a monument-fountain to commemorate Serbian victories in the Balkan Wars in 1913. The nudity of the sculpture, appropriately named the 'Victor', was condemned by the Belgrade public. It was only in 1928 that the sculpture was installed, not at the previously planned spot in Belgrade downtown but on Kalemegdan fortress, facing the confluence of the Sava and the Danube.<sup>111</sup>

Attacks on the bridge's equestrian statues culminated in late November 1934, only a week before the ceremonial opening of the bridge. After the tragic death of Meštrović's ardent supporter, King Alexander I, a month before, nobody was certain whether the horsemen would be erected at all. The Serbian poet and essayist Rade Drainac was given a surprisingly large space in several consecutive issues of the Belgrade newspaper *Pravda* to denounce Meštrović's 'despicable project'.<sup>112</sup> The intended target was not only the work but the artist himself. Drainac alluded to Meštrović's peasant background, calling him a 'farmer turned gentleman' and tarnished his reputation and credentials. He described Meštrović as being avaricious, calling him a 'crafty worshiper of the golden calf'.<sup>113</sup> The sculptor responded somewhat sanctimoniously and asked why was it that among many public works in the country only his were so mercilessly execrated.

'How is it possible that architects and artists', wondered Meštrović, 'only now became aware of the unsightly bridge, whose piers do not harmonize with the iron construction, only now when my "horsemen" are called into question? . . . I am asking both Associations where they were then, when this and many other questions were being discussed; [I wonder] why they did not feel competent then and why they have only now, all of a sudden, become so quick to react and judge?'

He blamed the Belgrade professional guilds of artists and engineers for being corrupted and dishonest, calling them a 'self-serving clique' who behaved 'more demagogically than professionally'.<sup>114</sup>

On the contrary, there were some Zagreb-based intellectuals who put up a sturdy defence of Meštrović and his design. But they were voices in the wilderness. These few champions of the sculptor's work shed another light on the ideological, not only professional motivation that stood behind the synchronised actions from Belgrade. One of these pro-Meštrović supporters was the Serbian poet,

<sup>108</sup> M. R., 'Da li će se na Zemunskom mostu'.

<sup>109</sup> Aleksandar Ignjatović, 'From Constructed Memory to Imagined National Tradition: Tomb of the Unknown Yugoslav Hero (1934–1938)', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 88, 4 (2010), 624–51.

<sup>110</sup> See for example: Djurdje Bošković, 'Ispitivanje i rušenje grada na Avali', *Starinar*, 10–11 (1935–6), 144–5.

<sup>111</sup> Milan Čurčin, 'Meštrovićev "Pobednik"', *Nova Evropa*, XVI, 1, (1927), 2–8; Danijela Vanušić, 'Podizanje Spomenika Pobjede na Terazijama', *Nasledje*, IX (2008), 193–209; Radina Vučetić-Mladenović, 'Pobedjeni *Pobednik*', *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju*, VI, 2, (1999), 110–23.

<sup>112</sup> Drainac was the leader of the short-lived movement 'Hypnism', being one of many Serbian avant-gardists, like Ljubomir Micić and Miloš Crnjanski, who would later in their career become virulent nationalists.

<sup>113</sup> Rade Drainac, 'Ivan Meštrović: Studija o njegovom višem Ja', *Pravda*, 18, 21 and 24 November 1934.

<sup>114</sup> 'G. Ivan Meštrović odgovara'.



scholar and publicist Milan Ćurčin, who published an apologia for the artist and his work in *Nova Evropa* under the title 'Public clamour over Meštrović again'. He denounced what he saw as unprincipled arguments of the belligerent attackers, which were more ad hominem than factual.<sup>115</sup> The most compelling counter argument to the Belgrade critics came from Ivo Franić Požežanin, the director of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb – and also a declared pro-Yugoslav and strong opponent of Croatian nationalism<sup>116</sup> – who tried to provide learned evidence in support of the equestrian statues.<sup>117</sup>

In Belgrade, there was also a reaction against attacks on Meštrović, but it went in a different direction. Rather than defending the artist, the respondents wanted to protect the principles of professionalism. The polemic started when the painters Mihajlo Petrov and Jovan Bijelić used the opportunity not only to complain about Meštrović and Krasnov's untouchable status as privileged artists,<sup>118</sup> but also to draw attention to the aesthetic misery of Belgrade architecture and urbanism. They openly accused their colleagues of hypocrisy because they raised their voice only when the final decoration for the already decorated bridge was being conferred on Meštrović.<sup>119</sup> The staunchest defender of professionalism was again Bošković, an avid pro-Yugoslav and anti-nationalist, who denounced the duplicity of Krasnov and Meštrović's critics.<sup>120</sup> He shrewdly noticed that they vehemently attacked Meštrović's design for the sake of retaining modern purism epitomised by the iron bridge, while simultaneously pleading for a ridiculous idea of complementing it with an 'architectural-sculptural decoration' which, paradoxically, had already been materialised in its most flamboyant form by Meštrović's design. Undoubtedly, there was something more than a sheer matter of aesthetic dissatisfaction that sparked impetuous criticism levelled by the Belgrade artists and architects.

### Epilogue: The Lions of Emperor Dušan

In March 1933, not long before the 'Romanesque Byzantine' supports had been completed, the newspapers announced that the bridge would be soon decorated with four massive, 5-metre-long lions.<sup>121</sup> Initial sketches had already been done by Krasnov in 1931,<sup>122</sup> but a year later the Ministry of Construction decided to organise a limited competition, where several Yugoslav sculptors were invited to submit their designs.<sup>123</sup> Although this project eventually failed to materialise, like the equally ill-fated sculptures of Meštrović's horsemen which, after the king's death, lost their main patron, it spurred similar controversy. Unlike the complex symbolism of Meštrović's idea, which referred simultaneously to different visions of Yugoslavism, the lions should only 'personify power and serve as immortal guardians of the bridge'.<sup>124</sup> Nonetheless, even this prosaic and universal symbolism soon became entangled with national meanings.

After the announcement of the project, Belgrade newspapers ignited a polemic between those who abstained from ascribing a particularly national meaning to the planned gigantic stone lions, others

<sup>115</sup> M[ilan]. Ć[určin], 'Opet hajka na Meštrovića', *Nova Evropa*, XXVII, 3 (1934), 93–5.

<sup>116</sup> Željko Karaula, 'Letter by Ivo Franić Požežanin, Director of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, to the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Milan Stojadinović in 1937', *Etnološka istraživanja*, 15 (2010), 237–45.

<sup>117</sup> Ivo Franić, 'Nemo propheta in patria', *Narodne novine*, C, 71 (1934), 4–5.

<sup>118</sup> M. R., 'Da li će se na Zemunskom mostu'.

<sup>119</sup> R. M., 'Jedan buran umetnički skup u oronuloj opštinskoj zgradi', *Pravda*, 3 March 1934. The same attitude was shared by a few engineers and architects, like Sabo Jelić, who wrote an article explaining, not without a hint of wry irony, that 'despite the alacrity of the Association of Fine Arts, the now-regenerated Belgrade wears . . . the mock mask of classical beauty'. He added that this phenomenon 'has not as yet been either ridiculed or condemned by colleagues' who turned their attention to the problem only recently; see: Jelić, 'Estetika', 569.

<sup>120</sup> Bošković, 'Most', 71.

<sup>121</sup> 'Na Zemunskom mostu biće postavljena četiri ogromna lava, kao straža', *Politika*, 6 March 1933; 'Nepoznati gospodin koji se interesuje za lavove na Zemunskom mostu', *Politika*, 8 March 1933; 'Slučaj s lavovima', *Politika*, 9 March 1933.

<sup>122</sup> The sketches were dated 8 August 1931, see: AF, Ministarstvo gradjevina, F. 62, f. 435, zbirka planova 676.

<sup>123</sup> The ministry organised a special committee for the purpose whose members were Nikolay Krasnov and Petar Popović, the architects employed by the same ministry, accompanied by the sculptor Djordje Jovanović; see: AJ, Ministarstvo gradjevina F. 62, f. 1230.

<sup>124</sup> 'Na Zemunskom mostu', *Politika*, 6 March 1933.

who considered them to be a telling symbol of the ‘greatness and power of the [medieval Serbian] Nemanjić dynasty’, as well as those who interpreted the lions as the ominous tokens of foreign, adverse imperialism that once menaced the newly united nation.<sup>125</sup> Among the latter was Ilija Trifunović-Birčanin, the prominent Serbian nationalist, leader of the paramilitary Chetnik Association.<sup>126</sup> He thought that if one put the lions on the bridge, it would be not only historically inaccurate – because the lion had never been a Serbian national symbol – but also morally inappropriate.<sup>127</sup> The reaction against Birčanin’s remarks was equally impassioned and equally nationalistic, including a range of dubious questions – for example, whether the emperor Dušan’s coat of arms had a lion incorporated in it and what sort of lion it was; if Nemanjić’s imperial leonine regalia included ‘authentically Serbian’ motives; why the Serbian folk epic poetry mentioned the same creatures and in which context, etc.<sup>128</sup>

There were, however, a couple of alternative designs, but they all arose from the same ideological background. One of these was the idea of creating a sculptural representation of four unnamed but presumably still living ‘Serbian military commanders and royal adjutants’, who were praised for their courage in the Great War.<sup>129</sup> Others suggested installing four sculptures representing great epochs in Belgrade military history: ‘a Roman legionary, an emperor Dušan’s mercenary, a warrior-liberator from the first Serbian uprising against the Ottomans (1804–13), as well as a soldier from the Great War’.<sup>130</sup> The idea of the mounted heroes reflected hackneyed phrases about the cardinal Serbian role in the South Slavic ‘liberation and unification’, which was interpreted as a long historical process which eventually ended in 1918.<sup>131</sup> In the perspective of both ‘imperial lions’ and imagined ‘historical heroes’, the bridge and its decoration became a metaphor of a Yugoslavia in which national unity was accomplished by Serbian military expansion, a country in which Serbs should have a leading role. Contrary to this Serbian-centred vision of Yugoslavism, Meštrović’s four horse-riding kings taken from Serbian, Croatian and Yugoslav pasts embodied a more inclusive, and ideologically more elastic concept of national identity.

The Zemun Bridge, with its shifting identities and constantly changing visual iconography, is a telling example of the complex interplay between different visions of Yugoslavism, underpinned by both political and professional agendas. Over the course of five years, between 1929 and 1934, as the construction of the bridge advanced, different proposals for its final appearance were unfolded. These proposals provoked reactions that corresponded both to the perceptions and roles of various groups in Yugoslavia – Serbs and Croats, architects and engineers, natives and foreigners. With the Marseille regicide in October 1934, the tables were beginning to turn: the officially constructed symbolism of the bridge was challenged and a sense of exclusively Serbian credit for creating a unified and free South Slavic country became a more prominent discourse about the bridge.

In mid-December that year, when the bridge was ceremonially opened in the midst of national mourning for the king, neither the horsemen nor the lions, nor any statues whatsoever, were erected to decorate the bare iron construction. On this occasion, several opening speeches delivered by state officials further reinforced a particularly Serbian version of the Yugoslav national ‘liberation and unification’ narrative. The symbolic role of the bridge was exclusively seen in terms of stressing the Serbian national continuity, as a testimony to historical development from the medieval empire

<sup>125</sup> Ilija Ž. Trifunović, ‘Zašto baš lavovi’, *Politika*, 14 March 1933; Pavle Cerović, ‘Da li su lavovi tuđinski simboli?’, *Politika*, 15 March 1933; Ilija Ž. Trifunović, ‘Da li su lavovi nacionalni simboli’, *Politika*, 17 March 1933; Pavle Cerović, ‘Da li “Dušanove novotarije” mogu biti naše’, *Politika*, 18 March 1933.

<sup>126</sup> On Trifunović-Birčanin see: John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 107–9.

<sup>127</sup> Trifunović, ‘Lavovi’.

<sup>128</sup> Cerović, ‘Novotarije’.

<sup>129</sup> Trifunović, ‘Lavovi’.

<sup>130</sup> *Štampa*, 16 December 1934.

<sup>131</sup> See for example: Vladimir Ćorović, *Istorija Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Narodno delo, 1933); Vladimir Ćorović, *Borba za nezavisnost Balkana* (Belgrade: Balkanski institut, 1937); Slobodan Jovanović, *Jugoslovenska misao u prošlosti i sadašnjosti* (Belgrade: Biblioteka Srpskog kulturnog kluba i Sloboda: 1939).

and the great, ‘immortal Karadjordje, to the final act achieved by his great-grandson, the Triumphant King Alexander I’.<sup>132</sup> Under these circumstances, the meaning of the structure that had just spanned the Sava River and connected two parts of Greater Belgrade seemed to have been resolved and the question of installing Meštrović’s sculptures seemed all but incomprehensible. This was exactly the moment when the ‘government officials found themselves admitting once again that no one quite knew what Yugoslavism meant’,<sup>133</sup> which eventually led to the ‘breakdown of *national Yugoslavism*’.<sup>134</sup> The subtle and thoughtful synthesis of Yugoslav primordialism and syncretism, which distinguished both Krasnov and Meštrović’s designs, lost its *raison d’être*, despite Meštrović’s determination to have his great idea materialised.<sup>135</sup>

The Bridge of King Alexander I was mined on 9 April 1941 by the Yugoslav Army in desperate attempts to forestall the rapid advancement of the Wehrmacht forces. Three days later, the Germans arrived in the city which they had already heavily bombarded. The Sava River became the state border again, separating the Military Commander in Serbia and the newly established Independent State of Croatia, two of Europe’s new political entities of dubious sovereignty, but of an unquestionable nationalistic legitimacy.

If examined more carefully, the Zemun Bridge becomes a graphic reminder of the power of architecture and art in 1930s Europe – a material testimony of the rivalries, tensions and discontents that existed between different visions of national identity in a country seeking a cohesive national narrative. More specifically, the bridge’s relevance for a history of national ideas lies in the fact that it represents outstanding material evidence of the negotiation between competing and complementary national ideologies. If seen not merely as a piece of architecture, art or engineering, but rather as an ideological narrative, a landmark both of Belgrade’s urban and political landscape, the Zemun Bridge is a particularly vivid example of the elusive, complex and controversial processes of imagining the Yugoslav nation in the unsettling political context of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia of the early 1930s. The bridge remains an object of considerably more relevance for historical scholarship because it powerfully discloses the ideological ambiguities of the Yugoslavism of the 1930s. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to a wider context of a 1930s Europe rapidly turning away from democracy, ultimately showing that politics and power were everywhere, not just in the words and actions of political elites.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Most Viteškog Kralja Aleksandra I Ujedinitelja svečano je osvećen i predat saobraćaju’, *Beogradske opštinske novine*, 53, 12 (1934), 862.

<sup>133</sup> Nielsen, *Yugoslavs*, 242.

<sup>134</sup> Dimić, *Politika*, 332.

<sup>135</sup> Milan Kašanin, *Susreti i pisma* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1974), 157.