

“THE GENERATION AT A CLOSED DOOR”: SLOVENIAN INTELLECTUAL ISSUES BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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An article with the telling title “The Generation at a Closed Door” (“Generacija pred zaprtimi vrati”)¹ was written in 1937 by the young writer and literary critic, Ivo Brnčič (1912–43). Having secured his first job (as a teacher’s assistant in a primary school) five years after graduating in Slavic studies from Ljubljana University in 1935, Brnčič describes the dead-end position of his entire generation in Yugoslavia, as well as in a large part of Europe at that time. Following the Depression, the value of intellectual work fell dramatically in comparison with that of physical work, and the number of jobless people with university degrees started growing rapidly. Brnčič wrote about more than 150 unemployed college professors and of several hundred teachers; he cited no information on the number of unemployed professional college graduates—lawyers, doctors, and engineers—in Slovenia. At the time this represented an unemployment rate of over 20% among potential teachers and professors, and of all these educated young people, each year only around 10% of those seeking jobs were thought to have found suitable employment.²

At this same time, Professor Stanko Škerlj of Ljubljana University identified the Depression as the main reason for the overcrowding in Yugoslav universities and the unemployment rate among graduates. Owing to demand, enrollment at universities grew dramatically in the 1920s, and consequently unemployment among graduates in the 1930s was all the more noticeable. The Depression had reduced the number of government jobs, and the prospects of professional employment in the private sector had also shrunk. According to Škerlj, pressure on the universities was sharpened by the lack of jobs for high school graduates and by the steadily increasing proportion of female students in higher education. The percentage of students who

¹ Ivo Brnčič, “Generacija pred zaprtimi vrati,” *Ljubljanski zvon*, 57.11–12 (1937): 506–12

² Brnčič, “Generacija pred zaprtimi vrati,” 509.

completed their studies on time fell to around one-third.³ This situation contributed to the fact that in the second half of the 1930s radical political options enjoyed increasing popularity among educated young people: communism on the one hand, and Catholic corporate statism along Austrian or Portuguese lines—or even various forms of fascism—on the other. Between these extremes were numerous different kinds of political compromise built upon liberal democratic gains. These political positions were attempts to forge links between a variety of social and ideological orientations (social democrats, Christian socialists, liberal democrats). There was also no shortage of educated people who entirely rejected democracy, advocating capitalist industrial production in the name of power and efficiency (e.g., the pro-Nazi ZBOR).⁴

The issue of the social system in Yugoslavia, primarily an issue of social legislation, parliamentary democracy, corporativism, or possibly at that time in Central Europe of personal dictatorship, came to the forefront of Slovenian intellectual interest only as a result of the great Depression of the 1930s, which coincided in Yugoslavia with the imposition of King Aleksander's dictatorship. Right up until that time, by far the most discussed political issue was the system of state administration and the associated question of preserving the Slovenians', Croats', and Serbs' ethnic identity,⁵ versus their accelerated molding into a unified Yugoslav nationality. In fact, the problem of state administration and the nationality issue, over which in 1928 three Croatian deputies were murdered in the parliament in a dispute with Serbs, was the main reason for the imposition of dictatorship by the king in January 1929.

The nationality issue in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes became a salient point in Slovenian circles soon after its

³ S. B., "Nezaposlenost mladih intelektualcev," ("Unemployment of Young Intellectuals") *Misel in delo: Kulturna in socialna revija* 2.4 (1936): 163–65.

⁴ Zadružna Borbena Organizacija Rada (Co-operative Combative Organization of Labor) led by Serbian lawyer Dimitrije Ljotić. For more, see Mladen Stefanović, *Zbor Dimitrija Ljotića, 1934-1945* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1984).

⁵ The official, constitutional definition (1921) described the unified Yugoslav nation as composed of three "tribes," but the old (prewar) identities were based primarily on language (Slovenian) and religion (Croatian-Catholic and Serbian-Orthodox). They were stronger and in the middle of the 1930s and prevailed.

establishment. During the First World War, and until the merger of the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs of the Habsburg dominions with the Kingdom of Serbia on December 1, 1918, almost all Slovenian politicians stressed the unity of the "three-named" (*troimeni*, i.e., Serbs, Croats, Slovenes) nation, since right up until its final enactment, the merger remained questionable, particularly for the Slovenians. Further, not until the end of the war were the Austro-German nationalists prepared to relinquish the strip of territory down to Trieste to the new Slavic state. Enthusiasm among the Slovenians over ethnic unity rapidly diminished within the first few years of life in the common state. There was already an affirmation of the warnings regarding the great cultural differences between the Yugoslavs during the war. Such warnings had been expressed publicly by certain intellectuals (Ivan Cankar, Anton Štebi, Ivan Šušteršič).⁶ There was also an affirmation of the old fears, chiefly of Croatian politicians, that Serbia would try simply to integrate and to assimilate the new regions of the former Habsburg empire and to dominate the entire country as soon as it was possible. This began immediately after the formation of the first joint government in December 1918, when liberals in coalition with the main Serbian parties prevented the formation of regional parliaments, and with the frequently aggressive imposition of administrative measures from Belgrade over the regional governments in Ljubljana, Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Split.⁷ Centralized administration was sealed with the forced adoption of the centralist "Vidovdan" constitution of June 1921.⁸

It was precisely at the time of the constitutional debate that Slovenian intellectuals carried out the campaign of signing the so-called autonomist statement (*Avtonomistična izjava*) in February 1921. The statement demanded a constitutional order that would protect the

⁶ Ivan Cankar, "Slovenci in Jugoslovani," *Zbrano delo* 25, ed. France Bernik, Series *Zbrana dela slovenskih pesnikov in pisateljev* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1976) 228–38; Anton Štebi, "Resnice in ideali jugoslovanskega problema," *Demokracija* 1.1–2 (1918): 256; "Tri struje," *Resnica*, September 14, 1918. For more information, see Jurij Perovšek, *Slovenska osamosvojitve v letu 1918: Študija o slovenski državnosti v državi Slovencev, Hrvatov in Srbov* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 1998) 140–41.

⁷ Momčilo Zečević, *Slovenska ljudska stranka in jugoslovansko zedinjenje 1917-1921* (Maribor: Obzorja 1977) 220–28.

⁸ Branislav Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke u Jugoslaviji (1919-1929)* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, Narodna knjiga, 1979) 94-114.

already formed cultural (national) identities in the new Yugoslavia. The majority of Slovenian intellectuals had already opted for Slovenian cultural autonomy within Yugoslavia at the time of the state merger in 1918.⁹ In the autonomist statement, they also demanded administrative and economic autonomy for the several very different regions. The statement was subject to extreme politicization and had negative repercussions in the Belgrade parliament. It triggered the adoption by almost all political parties of autonomist—or what could in some sense be called federalist—positions versus centralist positions on the system of administration.

The professors of Ljubljana University, members of the Slovenska matica scholarly society, the Slovenian Literary Society, and even the members of the professional associations of doctors and engineers, all had to choose sides. The majority supported the statement and with it the preservation of Slovenian identity in the Yugoslav community. The statement signaled the start not only of the autonomy movement, which was then pursued in the political arena by the Slovenska ljudska stranka (Slovenian People's Party), but also of the process of depoliticization of intellectuals, or the gradual cessation of their direct political involvement, which was characteristic of the Austrian period. In Austria-Hungary before 1918 the great majority of Slovenian intellectuals supported equal use of the Slovene and German languages in state administration. Signing the statement and the process of defining one's position that this triggered was the first successful non-party political campaign in modern Slovenia and a major step toward forming a civil society. These events brought the politically motivated section of Slovenia's intellectuals radically closer to the concept of an

⁹ Bogo Grafenauer, "Vprašanje kulturne avtonomije leta 1918," *Zgodovinski časopis* 42.4 (1988): 561–69; Ervin Dolenc, "The Slovenian Question: A Change of View on the Yugoslavian Community," Workshop Ideology and Historiography, The Making of Identity in Yugoslavian Historiography, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Florence, 8 May 2000, forthcoming in *Österreichische Osthefte*, 2003; Ervin Dolenc, "Intelektualci, slovenstvo in avtonomija," *Slovenske zamisli o prihodnosti okrog leta 1918: narodna vlada, Država SHS in slovenske zamisli o prihodnosti pred letom 1918 in po njem*, ed. Peter Vodopivec (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2000) 109–20.

intellectual that was formed at the time of the notorious Dreyfus affair at the turn of the century in France.¹⁰

The Slovenian national question in Yugoslavia was the most pressing problem for Slovenian intellectuals throughout the 1920s. It became especially acute in the first half of the 1930s, when the royal dictatorship fixed as its primary goal the rapid molding of ethnic elements into a unified Yugoslav nation. There were frequent debates printed in the Zagreb magazine *Nova Evropa* on the possibility of a rapid or slow approximation of the Slovenian language to Serbo-Croatian. The editor-in-chief, Serbian Slavic specialist Milan Ćurćin, rejected, for example, insistence on a special Slovenian identity as unacceptable from historical, ethnological, and philological viewpoints. He pointed out that the Slovenian question would sooner or later become a major political problem, since a nation and state could not exist with two equal (official) literary languages.¹¹ The Slovenians, who represented a mere 8.5% of the Yugoslav population, quickly realized that an approximation of the two languages could only proceed by sacrificing Slovenian. Right from the start of the common Yugoslav state, many Slovenians had unequivocally rejected this.¹²

There had, in general, always been little sympathy among Croatian and Serbian intellectuals, especially linguists, for the preservation of Slovenian. In Slovenia it was precisely these views and the political pressure that steered attitudes on the language question in another direction. Alongside debates on rapid versus slow assimilation of Slovenian into Serbo-Croatian, there was a continually expanding circle of those who insisted on preservation of Slovenian identity expressed by language. Some even adopted the position that the long-term solution to Slovenia's national question lay in an independent nation-state, but in

¹⁰ Peter Vodopivec, "Vloga slovenskih intelektualcev pri emancipaciji Slovencev," *Slovenija 1848-1998: Iskanje lastne poti*, ed. Stane Granda and Barbara Šatej. (Maribor: Univerza v Mariboru, Zveza zgodovinskih društev Slovenije, 1998) 124.

¹¹ Milan Ćurćin, "Slovenačko pitanje," *Nova Evropa* 5.5 (11 June 1922): 129–32.

¹² Andrew B. Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 79–90.

terms of the international situation at that time this was not an option.¹³ The high point of partisanship in cultural and political circles was triggered by Josip Vidmar's book *Kulturni problem slovenstva* (*The Cultural Problem of Slovendom*),¹⁴ which supported Slovenian identity at any price and as an absolute cultural value, even for others in Yugoslavia. The book generated stormy reactions, first in cultural circles, and then, subsequently, in the political arena. The debate was ongoing in 1932 and 1933, when the elimination of Slovenian in favor of Serbo-Croatian in schools marked the most intense unitarist pressure on the part of the Yugoslav government. The controversy ended with almost no one in Slovenia arguing in favor of a rapid adaptation of Slovenian to Serbo-Croatian. The circle of intellectuals who remained true, owing to their professional positions, to liberal politicians now allowed for the possibility of Slovenian assimilation only as the fruit of a natural and lengthy historical process. All others were in agreement that the special Slovenian identity within the Yugoslav community could not be rejected.¹⁵

In 1918, a third of the densely settled Slovenians were left outside the new Yugoslav state. The sizeable Slovenian minorities in Italy, Austria, and Hungary were not recognized as such, and their ethnic identity was forcibly suppressed. Faced with the impotence of international law on minorities, the issue of human rights was of concern to Slovenian intellectuals primarily in connection with minorities.¹⁶ For

¹³ Božo Vodusek, "Etika in politična miselnost Slovencev," *Križ na gori* 3.6–7 (1926/27): 103–109.

¹⁴ On the term "Slovendom," see: Rado Lencek, review of *Josip Vidmar, Kulturni problem slovenstva, as a memorial to the 100th anniversary of Vidmar's birth* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995). *Slovene Studies* 16.2 (1994): 140–43.

¹⁵ Ervin Dolenc, "Med slovenstvom in jugoslovanstvom: Borko in kulturna politika med dvema svetovnima vojnama," *Borkov zbornik*, ed. Marko Jesenšek and Viktor Vrbnjak (Maribor: Slavistično društvo Maribor, 1996) 379–92; Mihael Glavan, "Boj za slovenščino v šoli in učbenike za materinščino (1919–1945)," *Obdobja 7: Socialni realizem v slovenski književnosti, jeziku in kulturi*, ed. Fran Zadravec (Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 1987) 449–65; Peter Vodopivec, "Slovenci v tridesetih letih," *Obdobja 7*, 595–605.

¹⁶ Two Slovenians, Josip Wilfan and Engelbert Besednjak, led the Congress of European Nationalities, a suborganization of the League of Nations in Vienna between 1925 and 1938. See Egon Pelikan, *Tajno delovanje primorske*

the purpose of studying and gathering information on the Slovenian minorities and the sizeable German minority in Slovenia, the Minority Institute (Manjšinski inštitut) was set up in Ljubljana in 1925.¹⁷

At the same time as the great debate on Slovenian and Yugoslav identity was unfolding, other social issues were also attracting attention. In the 1930s, the Depression and the crisis of democracy began the process of restructuring the traditional ideological divisions among liberals, Catholics, and Marxists. Before the First World War the majority of Slovenian intellectuals were liberal in orientation. In the 1920s, however, as has been noted earlier in connection with the autonomist statement, intellectuals started taking part in public life outside of political parties on certain specific political issues. Rejection of the liberal political leaders was expressed publicly following their entry into the government in 1931. The main reason for this was their active involvement in the king's concept of a rapid and relatively aggressive Yugoslav national unification. Disaffection in connection with the national question was soon bolstered by dissatisfaction over the very limited democracy and the weak social policy. In the 1930s, the liberals were gradually and increasingly fragmented into a multitude of different political and intellectual groups most clearly distinguished on the basis of their attitudes toward the topical issues of nationality, system of state, democracy, fascism, and communism. These issues were frequently complemented by generational disputes and personal antagonisms, such that each one of these groups or individuals sought links with one or another political side.¹⁸ As the young historian Fran Zwitter wrote in

duhovščine pod fašizmom: Primorski krščanski socialci med Vatikanom, fašistično Italijo in slovensko katoliško desnico - zgodovinsko ozadje romana Kaplan Martin Čedermac, trans. Alan McConnell-Duff (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 2002) 414–44.

¹⁷ Janez Stergar, *Seven Decades of the Institute for Ethnic Studies* (Ljubljana: Institute for Ethnic Studies, 1995).

¹⁸ Vasilij Melik, "Slovenski liberalni tabor in njegovo razpadanje," *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja* 22.1–2 (1982): 19–23; Bojan Godeša, *Kdor ni z nami je proti nam: slovenski izobraženci med okupatorji, Osvobodilno fronto in protirevolucionarnim taborom* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995) 39–46; Anka Vidovič Miklavšič, *Mladina med nacionalizmom in katolicizmom: pregled razvoja in dejavnosti mladinskih organizacij, društev in gibanj v liberalno-unitarnem in katoliškem taboru v letih 1929–1941 v jugoslovanskem delu Slovenije* (Ljubljana: študentska organizacije Univerze, 1994) 193–98.

1935, for the entire generation of liberal politicians in the first Yugoslavia, the liberals' level of corruption was another disturbing factor:

Splintered into several groups fervently scheming one against the other, all of them together had but one goal: take power at any price. They lost all sense of direction. Slovenian liberalism does not end in tempests and revolutions, as the champion of certain intellectual and ethical values, but nationally and socially uprooted it crumbles in a spiritual void and in a cynical struggle for crude gain.¹⁹

Belief in the positive mechanisms of the free market, individualism, freedom of thought and religion, political freedom, and tolerance of those who think differently were dealt a serious blow. One of the most prominent Slovenian liberal intellectuals, Milan Vidmar, identified the struggle against disorder and coincidence in human creation as the foundation of conflict in modern society. Progress and prosperity in Vidmar's view were only possible if the world were governed by order, without empires, under some kind of new-era enlightened absolutism.²⁰

In the same way, during the Depression, amid sharpening political tensions, what had been thus far a very homogeneous Catholic movement started to disintegrate. Serious disputes based on the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* arose between the political leaders of the movement and the main Catholic workers' union (syndicate), which was dominated by the ideology of Christian socialism along German and French lines. The union was joined by the Catholic youth organization *Krekova mladina*, in which a new generation of educated Catholics found a significant voice. This young Catholic intellectual circle gave increasing credence to a Marxist analysis of society, but in the spiritual

¹⁹ Observator, "Bankrot slovenskega liberalizma," *Sodobnost*, 3.7–8 (1935): 303–304.

²⁰ See Milan Vidmar, *Med Evropo in Ameriko* (Ljubljana: Slovenija, 1937); Igor Grdina, "Kaj storiti?: Prispevek k intelektualni zgodovini slovenskih tridesetih let," *Slovenci v Evropi: O nekaterih vidikih slovenske povezanosti s sosedi in Evropo*, ed. Peter Vodopivec (Ljubljana: Oddelek za zgodovino Filozofske fakultete, 2002) 156–62.

sphere it remained steadfastly Christian.²¹ These disputes became extremely ugly in 1937 with the publication of an article by the Catholic poet and philosopher Edvard Kocbek, "Premišljevanje o Španiji" ("Thoughts on Spain").²² The key points of the dispute were anti-fascism and defense of democracy on the one hand, and defense of the interests of the Catholic Church on the other. From here it was not far to an open admission that in choosing between communism and fascism—a decision which seemed increasingly urgent—the Church would chose fascism without any hesitation. In their need for a powerful enemy that would serve to unite them, the propaganda of Church and Catholic political circles spared no effort in warning of the danger of communism, and in doing so unwittingly increased communism's actual power.²³ Even in the traditionally homogeneous Catholic camp at the beginning of the Second World War, there were many groups that differed widely in their attitudes to the key problems of their time. Across the political spectrum, from left to right, it was possible to find a broad sweep of political positions, which at both ends came very close to the two ideological extremes.

Almost the entire time between the two world wars, the communists worked underground. Through a special strategy of infiltrating and assuming influence in legal organizations, they were becoming increasingly influential toward the end of the 1930s. During this time they directed their propaganda especially at young, disaffected intellectuals and students. The communists' influence was enhanced particularly by their policy of popular fronts—that is, alliances with other groups on the basis of anti-fascism²⁴—and a program of resolving the Slovenian national question on the basis of self-determination.²⁵ This

²¹ Janko Prunk, *Pot krščanskih socialistov v Osvobodilno fronto slovenskega naroda* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1977) 87–134.

²² Edvard Kocbek, "Premišljevanje o Španiji," *Dom in svet*, 50.3 (1937): 90–105.

²³ Godeša 1995, 52; Egon Pelikan, *Akomodacija ideologije političnega katolicizma na Slovenskem* (Maribor: Obzorja, 1997) 40–95.

²⁴ Alenka Nedog, *Ljudskofrontno gibanje v Sloveniji: od leta 1935 do 1941* (Ljubljana: Borec, 1978); Peter Vodopivec, "Moč in nemoč ideje in politike ljudske fronte, Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino (*Slovenci in leto 1941*) 41.2 (2001) 31–41.

²⁵ Bojan Godeša, "Priprave na revolucijo ali NOB?" *Slovenski upor: Osvobodilna fronta slovenskega naroda pred pol stoletja*, ed. F. Gestrin, B.

change of tactic profited them handsomely in terms of influence among young people and intellectuals.

As throughout Europe, the political scene in Slovenia and Yugoslavia became increasingly polarized. Hitler's rise to power and Stalin's policy changes leading to the founding of popular fronts combined to make the possibility of a new war very likely. Furthermore, there were the problems of the Spanish Civil War and the territorial demands of Germany and Italy. The Slovenian situation was especially affected by the German annexation of Austria in 1938, and with it the unbridled expansion of Hitler's Reich, incorporating the Slovenian minority in Carinthia, right up to the Yugoslav border. Soon after this, Czechoslovakia, a traditional ally of Slovenia, was ruthlessly destroyed. And in the fall of 1939 the bloodthirsty rampage across Europe began. All of this represented a direct threat to the Slovenians in Yugoslavia.²⁶

The tensions at the end of the 1930s served increasingly to establish a new generation of Slovenian intellectuals whose formative time was one of grave political and economic crisis, a generation at a closed door, a disappointed and impatient generation. This generation transformed the divisions of previous generations in keeping with the increasingly narrow intellectual space. Until then, the main conflict among Slovenians had without doubt been the "cultural struggle" (*Kulturkampf*) between liberalism and political Catholicism. In the mid-thirties, however, two political options were formed which brought together many different groups. Some were united by anti-fascism, others by anti-communism. These two negative positions consisted primarily of deciding which kind of totalitarianism presented the greater danger. In the anti-fascist camp, there was no shortage of anti-communists; at the same time the majority of anti-communists were anti-fascist, too. The adoption of extreme positions was significantly spurred by vocal and aggressive political extremists at the expense of the "silent" and moderate. Despite the general crisis in parliamentary democracy and the free market economy, limited circles in all three traditional ideological groups (Catholics, liberals, and Marxists) continued to insist on their

Grafenauer, J. Pleterski (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1991) 69–85.

²⁶ Bogo Grafenauer, "Diferenciacija in grupiranje političnih tokov v slovenskem političnem življenju od 1935 do konca 1940," *Slovenski upor* 7–20.

current relevance and promise. Political affiliation based on denial, fear, and enmity was without doubt a much weaker integrative factor than partisanship based on some positive agenda would have been. But in the extreme circumstances of war, it prevailed.²⁷

Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino

POVZETEK

"GENERACIJA PRED ZAPRTIMI VRATI": SLOVENSKE INTELEKTUALNE DILEME MED OBEMA VOJNAMA

Članek s tem povednim naslovom je leta 1937 napisal mladi pisatelj Ivo Brnčič, ko je opisoval brezizhodnost položaja svoje generacije v Jugoslaviji in v večjem delu takratne Evrope. Ob veliki gospodarski krizi je zelo padla cena intelektualnega dela, naraščati pa je začela brezposelnost med visoko izobraženimi. Velika gospodarska kriza in kraljeva diktatura v Jugoslaviji sta v 1930. letih preusmerili pozornost in spremenili politično strukturo slovenskih izobražencev. Vsa 1920. leta je bilo najbolj aktualno politično in intelektualno vprašanje državne ureditve in s tem povezane dileme zavestnega ustvarjanja enotnega jugoslovanskega naroda (tudi v etničnem smislu) ali ohranjanja posebne slovenske (in hrvaške ter srbske) identitete v skupni državi. Po rešitvi te dileme v korist slovenske (in drugih) posebnosti v šasu najhujšega unitarističnega pritiska v prvi polovici 1930. let, se je med slovenskimi intelektualci pozornost preusmerila k problemom socialne zakonodaje, učinkovitosti demokracije in diktature, smiselnosti korporativizma in podobno.

Zaostrene razmere po veliki gospodarski krizi in vse bolj agresivnem Hitlerjevem spreminjanju mednarodnega položaja v Evropi konec 1930. let, so oblikovale tudi novo generacijo razočaranih, nestrpnih in nezadovoljnih intelektualcev, "generacijo pred zaprtimi vrati". Ta generacija je prejšnje spore med "liberalci" in "klerikalci", "Jugoslovenarji" in "Samoslovenci" preoblikovala v skladu z vse bolj ozkim intelektualnim prostorom v dve politični opciji, ki sta združevali veliko zelo različno politično usmerjenih skupin. Ene je družil protifašizem, druge protikomunizem.

²⁷ Ervin Dolenc, "Slovenski intelektualci in njihove delitve," *Slovenska trideseta leta*, ed. Peter Vodopivec and Joža Mahnič (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1997) 194–201.