

How the Croatian Elites Switched over from the Habsburg Empire to the South Slav Kingdom in a Drunken Night in November 1918 On an Autobiographical Essay by Miroslav Krleža

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In his slightly fictionalized autobiographical essay *A Drunken November Night 1918* (written in 1942, first published in 1952), Miroslav Krleža attempts to reconstruct a scandal to whose creation he himself contributed to a large extent. In November 1918, in the interregnum from the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy to the foundation of the South Slav kingdom, the then young author felt compelled at a reception held in Zagreb in honor of the Serbian officers to protest loudly against the speech of the former high Habsburg officer Slavko Kvaternik. The scandal retrospectively reinforced Krleža's conviction of the misery of the contemporary Croatian elite, a circumstance whose reasons, in his opinion, lay not only in political opportunism and moral corruption, but also in unreflected utopianism and the underlying political naivety. His hope that after the dissolution of the compromised Habsburg rule the South Slav peoples could advance towards national and social emancipation was soon replaced by the sober insight that imperial Austro-Hungary was followed by a small-sized, Serb dominated post-imperial structure. By describing the period when the text was written, the Second World War and the Ustashe reign of terror in contemporary Croatia, and in doing so particularly referring to the conversion of many former Habsburg officers to the side of fascist movements, Krleža also emphatically reveals his own conception of history, according to which historical events appear to be an eternal recurrence in which human stupidity is coupled with an excessive use of power and violence.

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KEYWORDS

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In the early phase of his career Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981) made several appearances at public events in Zagreb in ways that produced a sensation. The best-known of these provocative actions, which may also be seen as part of the avant-garde attitude of the young author, was undoubtedly his attack against the hypocrisy of the Croatian elites in the wake of the First World War, in the interregnum between the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the foundation of the South Slav kingdom.¹ Namely, on 13 November 1918, Krleža, who would go on to become one of the leading Croatian writers of the following years, caused a serious incident at a reception given in honour of the first Serbian officers to arrive in Zagreb.

From contemporary newspaper reports about this event – and Krleža himself also commented on this in an article published only a few days afterwards – the following facts may be established: a pro-Yugoslav women's association organized a festive welcoming event in the Sokol Hall, Zagreb in honor of the Serbian officers – a symbolic act that was to announce the forthcoming unification of the South Slavs into a common state. The venue was hosted by Mate Drinković, Defence Commissioner of the provisional State of the National Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, who asked, among others, his deputy Lieutenant Colonel Slavko Kvaternik to deliver a speech welcoming the Serbian military. However, Krleža, who was also present at the event, protested against this with the loud cry “Down with the unworthy!” A known writer by this time, Krleža claimed in his interjection that Kvaternik was not a suitable person to greet the officers from Serbia, since as an Austro-Hungarian high commander in occupied Serbia in 1916 he was responsible for the hanging of a number of people. This led to a violent exchange of words, with some party guests welcoming Krleža's interjections, while others protested against them and portrayed Kvaternik as a supporter of the ‘cause of national unification’. The newspaper reports also referred to Drinković's bitter exclamation that he could execute anyone who ‘would betray our idea’, a statement that Krleža also mentions in his article as an additional reason for his outburst of anger that evening. It is unclear, however, whether Krleža was indeed – as he asserts in his later accounts of the event – thrown out by the use of force. Whatever his departure may have looked like, it is certain that the young writer was first allowed to speak and only interrupted and expelled from the hall after he began to speak in praise of the October Revolution and Lenin.²

¹Apart from the scandal at the reception given in honour of Serbian officers in November 1918, two other public excesses by young Krleža should be mentioned: at the annual meeting of the Croatian Writers' Association on June 6, 1918, he protested demonstratively against the mediocre debates of his elder colleagues: while the world was changing and the October Revolution was victorious, Croatian writers were talking about ephemeral problems; on March 4, 1919, angered by what he considered to be the miserable repertoire policy of the Croatian National Theatre, he disrupted the premiere performance of an entertainment play with loud shouts. – Cf. Lasić 1982, 150; Vel. V. (= Velimir Visković) 1999, 563). It is also on these two sources that some other biographical references to Krleža in the present paper are based.

²It should be added, however, that – as Vlaho Bogišić notes – Drinković and other party guests were by no means confronted with an anonymous actor in historical reality: indeed, as a social democratic activist, Krleža had been negotiating with Drinković and his ‘conspiratorial group’ in the preceding months of 1918 about a possible cooperation of both groups. – Cf. V. Bog. (= Vlaho Bogišić) 1993, 103.



Krleža produced several texts about the *éclat* of November 1918. First, as mentioned above, he wrote an article to be published in the short-lived social democratic journal *Sloboda* under the meaningful title *Crno-žuti skandal* (*Black and Yellow Scandal*) on 21 November 1918.³ It is revealing, however, that this newspaper text, subtitled by the author *Komentar mome ispadu na srpskoj čajanci u Sokolu* (*Comment on the disturbance I caused at the Serbian tea party at Sokol*), was later never reprinted. Although Krleža's presentation of the event differs only slightly from the depiction in other newspaper reports, some political aspects in the *Sloboda* article are completely different from those in the author's later work on this issue. As research suggests, this consideration must have led Krleža to decide not to republish the otherwise highly interesting article.⁴

In the interwar period, Krleža only commented on the scandalous incident in the essay collection *Moj obračun s njima* (*My Reckoning with Them*, 1932). Written in the genre of the great polemic essays, this book represents the culmination of Krleža's – sometimes very violent – confrontations with his opponents from various camps within the cultural and political scene, in this case from the liberal and clerical milieu.⁵ Asked by one of his opponents about the Kvaternik affair, Krleža replied that of everything that had gone through his mind “since that drunken night, one should write a book”, “on the motif of those drunkards in a smoky inn” which appeared to him as “a symbol of that night, and has remained as such”.⁶ Only in 1942, living in Zagreb under constant threat to his life by the fascist Ustasha regime, did Krleža decide to return to the topic of the ‘tea party’ – a decision which, at the same time, also indicated an important change in his genre preferences. While during the two interwar decades he produced aesthetically highly relevant works in the fields of poetry, narrative prose, drama and essay-writing, in the first half of the 1940s he focused on autobiographical and diaristic texts, literary genres that he had engaged with during the First World War, but since then had only touched on occasionally.

Krleža's diaristic writing, as Viktor Žmegač notes, cannot be reduced to a “predetermined model”, since the author “always used to interconnect different types of diary entries, sometimes in an intriguing, somewhat peculiar confrontation of heterogeneous discourses”,⁷ a circumstance referring especially to his book *Davni dani. Zapisi 1914–1921* (*Olden Days. Notations 1914–1921*),

³Krleža (1918), 3–4. – The Zagreb newspaper *Obzor* (14.11.1918, p. 3) reported in detail about the scandal, while the journals *Riječ* and *Jutarnji list* brought only shorter reports. For a summary see: Bogišić (1995), 29–36; V. Bog. (= Vlaho Bogišić) 1993, 103–104.

⁴What Krleža must have seen as problematic above all later on, according to his assessment offered in the *Black and Yellow Scandal*, were the so-called Green cadres, whom he described as “illiterate, barbaric, dominated by dark drives”; “an element dangerous to any form of civilization” (cf. Bogišić, 1993, 1995). In the Croatian deserters of the Austro-Hungarian army, who hid in the woods as outlaws and were therefore called ‘Green cadres’, he saw in later times a ‘missed revolutionary situation’, a power factor that was “more a rhetorical and moralistic negation than a programmatically systematized resistance” (cf. Io. B. (= Ivo Banac) 1999, 539–541).

⁵Krleža's polemics with opponents on the Left are the focus of his book *Dijalektički Antibarbarus* (*Dialectical Anti-barbarous*, 1939): when the cultural policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia came increasingly under the influence of the Stalinist poetics of socialist realism in the 1930s, Krleža, a resolute modernist and at the same time one of the founders of the Yugoslav communist movement, increasingly estranged himself from the political line of the CPY and finally fell into complete political isolation around 1940.

⁶Krleža (1983), 243.

⁷V. Žm (= Viktor Žmegač) 1999, 155.



originally published in 1956.⁸ A number of autobiographical texts were also integrated into this generically hybrid and thematically diverse work, which combines “elements of chronological notations” with “the dimension of the past” and was largely written in 1942 and 1943 “as a testimony to the intellect under the surveillance of political terror”.⁹ One of these texts, which are closely integrated with the diaristic corpus, but function as thoroughly autonomous units and have also appeared in print as such, is also the autobiographical essay *Pijana novembarska noć 1918* (*A Drunken November Night 1918*). This work, written in 1942 and first published in 1952 with an added *Epilogue*, is also Krleža’s representative text about the incident on the ‘tea party’ scandal.¹⁰ As the following section will show, *A Drunken November Night 1918* is rightly ascribed not only a high aesthetic value, but also high political and cultural-historical relevance. This phenomenon is demonstrated not only by the great popularity of the text among Krleža’s readers and its numerous adaptations to other media formats (theater, radio, television), but also by numerous references to its relevance in non-aesthetic contexts, and especially in the political, historiographical and socio-historical discourse.¹¹ Returning to the subject of the scandalous event in 1942, Krleža not only tried to justify both his critical assessment of the hypocrisy of the Croatian elites and his initial fears that the envisaged state formation, the South Slav kingdom, would turn out to be a miscarriage; the political reactivation of Slavko Kvaternik, the main protagonist of the ‘drunken November night’ seemed equally important to him at that moment.

After having served as a high-ranking officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army, he promptly offered his services to the newly founded Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, but retired as early as 1921 and subsequently became politically active in Croatian radical right-wing circles. On April 10, 1941, a few days after the attack of the Axis powers on Yugoslavia, it was Kvaternik who proclaimed the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), an Italo-German satellite state. And it was also him who passed the executive power to Ustasha leader Ante Pavelić when shortly afterwards he and many other members of the movement, including Kvaternik’s son Eugen Dido, returned from their Italian exile to Zagreb. Kvaternik became the supreme commander of the NDH military forces, and his son was appointed head of the security service, but thereupon he also assumed responsibility for the operation of the Ustasha concentration camps.¹²

The experience of complete isolation into which Krleža fell after the Ustasha seized power was nothing new to him. As early as the end of the 1930s he had become more and more isolated on the left-wing scene, after he had quarreled passionately with the Yugoslav Communist leaders on aesthetic and political issues. It is therefore remarkable that when asked why he stayed in

⁸Printed in book form for the first time in the so-called Zagreb edition of collected works: Krleža (1956). An extended version of *The Olden Days* was published within the so-called Sarajevo Edition of collected works as part of the five-volume diary edition: Krleža (1977).

⁹Žmegač (1999), 157.

¹⁰Cf. Krleža (1952). The work was also published in the following editions: Krleža (1956, 1973, 2013).

¹¹It is highly indicative, for example, that in two recent important overviews of Yugoslav history the problematic foundation of the South Slav state is exemplified by quotations from Krleža’s *A Drunken November Night 1918*: cf. Calic (2010), 81; Newman (2015).

¹²References to Croatian and Yugoslav history are based, among others, on following titles: Goldstein (1999), Calic (2010), Newman (2015), Sundhaussen (1982), Banac (1984).



Zagreb during the Second World War and why he did not join the partisans, he allegedly gave the sarcastic answer that it made no difference whether he would be killed by “Dido or Đido”.¹³ Krleža’s wordplay, according to which he was under a death threat from both the fascist Ustasha regime, personified in the figure of Eugen ‘Dido’ Kvaternik, as well as from the dogmatic wing of the communist partisans, embodied in the leading CPY ideologist Milovan Đilas ‘Đido’, refers to the dilemma that he, undoubtedly most prominent Croatian author of the period, had to face between 1941 and 1945. During one of his arrests by the Ustasha security forces, for example, he was contemptuously spat at by fellow Communist prisoners. On the other hand, he was also aware that as a proclaimed left-wing intellectual who was often opposed by the nationalist and clerical right in the interwar period, he now found himself in extremely difficult circumstances: in 1941 he was repeatedly imprisoned and released again; his books were burned; until the Ustasha leadership, apparently fearing international embarrassment, finally renounced further reprisals against the respected author.

Also very revealing in this context are Krleža’s considerations on the phenomenon of ‘Central European fascism’, presented in the aforementioned *Epilogue* to the first edition of the *Drunken Night* in 1952. By considering Kvaternik’s reactivation as the “reappearance of a ghost” (PNN, 155),¹⁴ Krleža thus refers particularly to the fact that many former k.u.k. officers joined the radical rightist movements in the interwar period and, after the outbreak of the Second World War, were promoted to high positions in the armies of the Axis powers. “These brown and black ants are now crawling in the monstrous opaque night, in which the ghost of the [...] commander appeared, who, together with his son Dido, liberated this Croatian country with [the concentration camp] Jasenovac.” (PNN, 155) Hence he emphasizes in the *Epilogue* that in the research on “Central European Fascism” particular attention should be paid to the “declassified elements of the Austrian military oligarchy” (PNN, 164) such as Slavko Kvaternik: “These professional engineers of mass bloodshed appear after the lost wars as the main disturbance of Central European and Danubian post-war history [...]” (PNN, 164).

The exact way in which Krleža diagnoses the emergence of right-wing radical political forces in post-Habsburg Croatia as well as in Central Europe, or the way in which he detects their devastating potential for violence in the context of future political developments, will become clearer in the following section through a closer reading of his autobiographical essay. By apparently fictionalizing the scandalous event in many aspects, the ‘tea party’ is turned by Krleža into an unbridled, debauched binge of excessive drinking and eating: the festive guests, renouncing all reason and morality in a state of frenzy, solemnly declare their wish to establish a new state association, without having critically reflected on the consequences of such a decision before – a situation which renders the resulting state formation to be questionable from the very hour of its birth.

This motif, which Krleža used for the first time here, but went on to vary in many different ways later on,¹⁵ can be encountered in his numerous works as the image of a ‘smoky inn’. It is

¹³Cf. Lasić (1989), 28, 31. The biographical references to Krleža are based mainly on the following sources: Lasić (1982); Vel. V. (= Velimir Visković) 1999, 552–589.

¹⁴All quotes from the essay were taken from the edition: Krleža (2013). In the following, cited with the abbreviation PNN and page number in brackets, all translations by the present author (M.B.). Cf. the German translation of the essay by Božena Begović under the title *Ein Requiem für Habsburg*: Krleža (1968).

¹⁵Cf. I. Fš. (= Ivo Frangeš) 1993, 52.



usually a place where the otherwise mutually hostile members of social elites not only unite against uncomfortable, morally and intellectually superior individuals – persons who expose their corruption and hypocrisy –, but also seek to destroy these free spirits. In the image of a lascivious, greedy, unteachable bunch, opposed to the steadfast intellectual in their midst, the young Krleža's tendency to provoke public controversies is connected with the frequently recurring constellation of his early works, presenting the relationship between the brilliant individual, a genius (or a dreamer), and the crowd in ecstatic scenes depicted in an expressionist manner. This fundamental relationship can also be found, for example, in the novel *Na rubu pameti* (*On the Edge of Reason*, 1938), where the first-person narrator, a Zagreb lawyer, is at odds with his mendacious and corrupt environment and eventually goes under in this clash. It is often said that a trait specific to Krleža's depiction of such situations is the interweaving of events in the narrative presence with flashbacks to earlier periods of the story and with related memory sequences and reflections. In the confrontation of the rebellious protagonist with the world of his adversaries, a world he himself once belonged to and is thus well acquainted with, the hero's failure is of lesser importance than the critical view gained into various social segments in the tension between present and past.

This kind of interplay between the narrative presence and the evocation of past events also occurs in *The Drunken November Night 1918*, where the first-person narrator – appearing belatedly at the 'tea party' – initially gazes in dismay at the raging of the frenzied crowd: the sight of ethnic fraternization amidst the alcoholic fumes evokes in him a foreboding about the future of the emerging South Slav state. His crisis-ridden perception of the deep historical caesura, whose meaning apparently eludes his contemporaries, leads Krleža's protagonist to associate it with the tragic history of the South Slav peoples. Some of its most striking stages are thereby recalled in an associative-eruptive, sometimes redundantly summary and grotesque style unique to the author:

It was a drunken night, and how drunk, drunk and foolish so that all reminders and flags, all Kajmakčalans [today Macedonian-Greek border mountains, site of a great Serbian victory in WW I] and all iconostases with the Adriatic Sea and with Our Beautiful Homeland [Croatian national anthem] have been woven together in the strange turmoil of a feverish, boisterous binge, so drunken, just as those olden days were when our Austro-Hungarian reality rolled away drunkenly under the throne of the Karadorđević dynasty. Like an empty beer bottle in the garbage... (PNN, 131)

In the inebriated crowd, the "I"-narrator initially observes the representatives of the Croatian political elite, formerly pro-Habsburg and now abruptly pro-Yugoslav, who – normally "gray lawyers and bureaucrats" – now suddenly become "Bonapartist loud and pushy" and imagine themselves "in the triumphant role of historical victors" (PNN, 132). Although they spent the war far away from the fronts, these "wretched vultures", who served the House of Austria faithfully throughout their lives, did not shrink from "speaking pathetically about a new dynasty" (PNN, 132).

The narrator also considers how this "political crème de la crème" in ecstasy merges with the "flowering of the Zagreb Yugosloyalist intelligentsia" (PNN, 132). Although this might rightly evoke turncoats from the ranks of the Croatian cultural elite, only recently loyal to the Habsburgs and now suddenly swearing eternal allegiance to the Serbian royal house, the roots of the newly spreading integral Yugoslavism – as the narrator suggests – lie considerably deeper. Not by accident he recalls one of the most influential Croatian modernist poets, Ivo Vojnović, who a



decade earlier began writing plays based on motifs from the Kosovo myth cycle, whose symbolist poetics, however, had much more to do with a pseudo-religious cult than with a committed cultural-political concern. In Vojnović's works, which the narrator had been reading just that evening, he sees no more than "phrases about national unity and liberation" and he had never found "this poet more papery and snobbish than that night" (PNN, 136).

From the Kosovo mythology – as Zoran Kravar points out¹⁶ – some Croatian artists such as Vojnović and the then world-famous sculptor Ivan Meštrović developed a complex mythopoetic structure with strong utopian accents: the unrevenged Kosovo was oppressing all South Slavs, and at the same time was in a mystical way associated with their political unfreedom; the reconquest of Kosovo, as a revision of the lost battle of 1389, will liberate the people – not only symbolically, but also in the historical reality – and thus open the road to the foundation of a South Slav union. In contrast to the Croatian adherents of the Kosovo cult, for whom the new state was more an eschatological event than a political project, Krleža departed from Yugoslav nationalism at an early stage. As a cadet at the Hungarian Military Academy in Budapest, he intended to join the victorious Serbian army as early as 1913, on the eve of the Second Balkan War, an undertaking that turned out to be almost fatal for him: suspected by the Serbian secret service as an Austrian spy, he barely escaped the death penalty and was then deported to his home country. The ensuing process of disillusionment, in which he abandoned one of the greatest illusions of his generation, the belief in Serbia as South Slav Piedmont, enabled the young Krleža to have a much more differentiated view of the First World War, the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and the subsequent establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS), as many other contemporary intellectuals did.

Krleža's narrator consequently declines to believe that the Serbian officers, for whose honor the lavish celebration has been arranged, came to Croatia "to defend Rijeka" against Italian claims. On the contrary, they came only – as will soon be proven in historical reality – "to arrest anyone who does not shout 'Long live King Petar' [Karadžević]" (PNN, 145). As a matter of fact, the new authorities will soon agree to the cessation of several Eastern Adriatic territories, including Rijeka, to Italy. The SHS Kingdom itself, democratically insufficient from the outset, would drift into an open dictatorship just a decade after the foundation of the state.

Krleža's early experience with the arrogance of the Serbian 'petty imperialism' is undoubtedly echoed in the reflections of his protagonist, trying to expose the pathetic speeches of the drunken party guests – held "over the imperial corpse, literally still warm" – in all their emptiness. In accordance with contemporary Serbian propaganda, the Karadžević dynasty was presented as "a 'young, progressive' dynasty", as "a dynasty that has 'Stuart Mill' translated", as a "socialist dynasty", a 'popular', even a 'republican' dynasty" (PNN, 132). In contrast to the exalted pose of the party speakers, the sober observer is fully aware that the Serbian ruling dynasty has little regard for parliamentary democracy and ethnic equality but obviously envisages an autocratic regime within a unitary state structure. The only purpose of this "royally drunken grunting" is therefore to "gamble away the last remnant of good sense which has not vanished from our half-empty and drunken heads" (PNN, 132).

The narrator is particularly concerned about the behavior of the three representatives of "our democratic 'graceful gentle sex'" (PNN 133) on whose initiative the welcoming ceremony for

¹⁶Cf. Kravar (2005), pp. 25–40.



Serbian officers was held. “Our sweet Zagreb girls” (PNN 133), as he refers to the three initiators, were actually leading advocates for women’s rights in contemporary Croatia,¹⁷ which the lonely observer – identical with the male elite present – only sees and judges in the context of the boisterous celebration. He thus notices them losing sight of “their imperial cavaliers” in a pathetic affect and “exchanging flatteries with the Serbs”, while – just like the male orators – unreflectively referring to “our new national dynasty” as “republican” and the future regent Aleksandar Karađorđević as “revolutionary, ideal, All-Slav, and a Yugoslav democrat” (PNN, 134).

The sight of the “drunken delirium” (PNN, 134) moves Krleža’s protagonist to the disturbing conclusion that such reckless behavior at historically decisive moments could lead to disastrous consequences: For “one will never know and experience what all of this actually looked like at such a historical moment, when the city of Zagreb celebrated the fall of Austria, in the year Eighteen and the month of November” (PNN, 135). The shift of the perspective from outside to inside, often occurring in Krleža’s diaristic and autobiographical writings, is, however, seldom followed by focusing on the narrator’s own inner life.¹⁸ For soon it becomes clear that this outburst of subjectivity can simply be considered as an occasion to further associations with underlying historical contexts. A “melancholy loneliness”, indicated by the narrator as the reason to appear at “this political ball”, is attributed to an “undefined feeling of many dead things lying around him” (PNN, 135), but by no means related to his inwardness. Instead, he presents a variety of associations to the painful history of the South Slavs who, following a “four-hundred-year-long night” (PNN, 135) of oppression by the Habsburgs, Ottomans and Venetians, were now once again missing a major historical chance. He seems to find an alternative to the negligent, even mindless acting of the leading elites in the resolute rebellion by the people, something he repeatedly includes in his thoughts in the form of glaring poetic images. Thus he sees – in accordance with Krleža’s expressionist imagination – that “in the city of Zagreb roofs were burning all around”, that one could hear “the crowing of fiery roosters and the bells ringing from burning church steeples”, a sign indicating that “the people once again, after Forty-Eight, start moving to rise up to become human, to stop kneeling before cylinders and cadavers” (PNN, 133).

Krleža’s protagonist, who “completely dissolved in images” (PNN, 141) at the sight of the booze-up, also recalls two striking political factors that might influence the situation in post-Habsburg Croatia. Initially, it is a brief association with Lenin, who “fights for the Internationale in St. Petersburg” (PNN, 141); announcing a rather diffuse inclination of the narrator toward the October Revolution, which had broken out exactly one year earlier. And whereas the reminiscence of the revolutionary events in Russia remains only vaguely suggested, the warning against the Italian invasion of South Slav territories rings dramatically: “[...] on the Riva degli Schiavoni the masses roar, and there d’Annunzio also barks [...] – the Morlach land is once again under threat to perish” (PNN, 141). The lonesome party guest clearly realizes that with “the death of the Habsburg” a long “circle of four hundred years is being closed”: just as in 1526, after the collapse of the Hungarian kingdom, the Croatian estates had begun the search for a new lord – a

¹⁷Krleža obviously refers to Zofka Kveder-Demetrović, Zlata Kovačević-Lopašić and Olga Krnic-Peješ. On this topic cf. Marjanić (2016).

¹⁸Cf. Žmegač (1993), 155.



papal legate allegedly wrote to Rome at that time: “Per trovarsi un’altro signore” –, so did also the “present-day estates and orders”, whose former king was still not buried, already find a “new spouse for the Kingdom of Croatia” (PNN, 141). The drunken ‘tea party’ is – as the narrator adds in a pointed way – nothing else but “the Croatian wedding with the Karađorđevićs” (PNN, 142). For the whole Croatian elite, “weighing in on a wine flood like a puked Noah’s ark”, there can be no doubt that, as the loudest of the drunken voices repeats several times, “only a donkey does not see that this is the only way for us” (PNN, 142).

That voice, as the solitary party guest immediately realizes, belongs to Mate Drinković, the National Council’s Defence Commissioner, addressing his most important staff member, Lieutenant Colonel Slavko Kvaternik, in a “hypocritically and doggishly servile” manner: if Drinković truly pays tribute to that “imperial-royal butcher-dog” (PNN, 142), who let people slay for four years, it could be nothing other than a sign of his senility. And Kvaternik, meanwhile, fraternizes with the Serbian officers and would – so it seems to the narrator – “shoot anyone who is against King Petar Karađorđević on that night, just as he had shot anyone who was in favor of Petar Karađorđević only the previous evening”, because – and now the identity of the first person narrator becomes unmistakably identified with the author Krleža – “he is not a human being, just a caricature from my war prose” (PNN, 143). Indeed, in the last two war years Krleža wrote a cycle of short stories published in 1922 under the title *Hrvatski bog Mars (The Croatian God Mars)*, dedicated to the senseless dying of countless Croatian soldiers. The troopers who appear in the short stories as victims of the anachronistic leadership of the k.u.k. army are often opposed by arrogant, frivolous and bestial officers of Croatian origin.

However, at the sight of Lieutenant Colonel Kvaternik amid the feast that is unleashed, its portrayal of these “hangmen,” as the exaggerated label by early readers of these war stories refers to them, seems not “that dark” (PNN, 143) at all. On the contrary: not only did Kvaternik let himself be photographed under the gallows with hanged Serbs in Belgrade in 1916, but also a year later, in 1917, during the bloody Isonzo battles, he often used to come to the idyllic Lovran on the Kvarner Bay with Field Marshal Borojevich, the Chief Commander of the Italian Front, to arrange dinners and lovers for himself – something the author Krleža knew from his own experience. In his numerous polemical writings, Krleža never hesitated to expose his opponents in public, as well as in private regards – thus he also sees Kvaternik’s “hangman, brothel, and officers’ mess services in a paranoid contradiction to the principles of human logic” (PNN, 144). Just as he – similarly to the narrator of the *Drunken November Night* – has no illusions about the Croatian ‘tea party’ guests, so he also presents the Serbian officers in a critical perspective. In his eyes, they appear as representatives of the radical Serbian military, a group which had used conspiratorial methods to initiate the assassination which took place in Sarajevo, as well as the killing of South Slav volunteers in Odessa, and which was now threatening to push the ex-Habsburg Slavs, “in ‘brotherly embrace’ with the Kvaterniks, into new abysses”. “In whose name? Under what political concepts and political plans?” (PNN, 145).

When “in this overall staggering of common sense” Drinković finally gave the word to Kvaternik, an expectant silence followed and the Lieutenant Colonel raised his glass and prepared to toast, the narrator felt compelled – obviously “sensing the intense disharmony of the dramatic historical moment” – to shout “Down with Kvaternik!” (PNN, 146). Waiting for the subsequent noise in the hall to calm down, the Defense Commissioner tried to announce his deputy’s speech once again, but the uninvited guest repeated his exclamation twice more, each time causing a general turmoil with his protest against Kvaternik. Following Drinković’s



request that “the malicious, provocative coward” should introduce himself publicly, he indeed gave his name – as did Krleža in the historical reality – besides declaring himself a “Croatian writer”. At first he was surprised by the acclaim his objections received from at least a part of the audience; however, he quickly realized that this approval had not arisen “along the line of logic” but was related instead solely to the applauders’ conviction that he had acted here as “a royalist port-parole” (PNN 148). When Drinković, now thoroughly bewildered, sought to intimidate him “in the tone of a drunken officer” by saying that he would “let him hang, regardless of who and what he was” (PNN, 148), the narrator yelled back at him that his protests were directed against Kvaternik’s war crimes. In doing so he not only reproached the Lieutenant Colonel for the Belgrade executions, but also called him “a black and yellow creature” representing “all that our people had rebelled against and were still rebelling against today” (PNN, 149). In the wild clamour and screaming which erupted at this point, expressions of sympathy mingled with those of disapproval; but the number of voices calling for the narrator to be allowed to speak became ever greater, leaving Drinković with no other choice but to resign himself and comply with their demands.

However, before Krleža’s protagonist started talking, he let a whole series of Habsburg officers pass by in his thoughts, officers who had placed themselves in the service of the authoritarian, often fascist regimes, from Glaise-Horstenau, Horthy and Gömbös, to the Croats Štancer, Lipošćak, Sarkotić¹⁹ and many others. This “army of black and yellow *condottieri*, *lansquenets*, squires and warriors, these hangmen who for centuries have been assassinating in foreign pay and who do not care whom they hang and slaughter” (PNN, 152) includes, in his view, Kvaternik, who – and this is how the uninvited guest begins his speech – “wants to make a toast to [...] the officers from Serbia, where only yesterday he was still hanging people, setting up an imperial-royal banquet before us tonight on behalf of liberation and unification!” (PNN, 153). With reference to the opulent festive buffet, the narrator adds that these meals should rather “be transported to those hungry Serbian soldiers who are freezing outside in the wagons at the station”, because – and with these words the scandal reaches its climax – “the victorious Russian Revolution has taught us that it is not the National Council but the soldiers’ and workers’ councils are the factor [...] with which Lenin...” (PNN, 153). The fact that the narrator – just like the historical author Krleža – dared to emphasize the October Revolution and its leader as a positive example in the political upheavals of the immediate postwar period finally turned against him even that part of the party followership which had previously seen him as an advocate of the Karađorđević dynasty and therefore backed his criticism of Kvaternik. In the uproar following his speech, the entire hall, “these thousand Yugoroyalist petty bourgeois” (PNN, 153), stood united against him: at Drinković’s command and “in the hysterical unison of an infernal, compact democratic majority” the troublemaker was unanimously thrown out: “with several crude kicks [...] booted from the Croatian inn”, he suddenly found himself “in the fog, on the street” (PNN, 154).

Besides the motif of the smoky inn, *Drunken November Night* contains another important component of Krleža’s wealth of imagery: the ring-dance, that ceaseless turning round and round in circles, wherein a raw and bloodthirsty violence merges with human narrow-

¹⁹Edmund Glaise-Horstenau (1882–1946), Miklós Horthy (1868–1957), Gyula Gömbös (1886–1936), Slavko Štancer (1872–1945), Anton Lipošćak (1863–1924), Stjepan Sarkotić (1858–1939).



mindfulness. This particular *Danse macabre* comes into play at the moment when the protagonist is thrown out of the party, expelled by the reunited crowd “on the corpse of his poetic arguments” (PNN, 154). Described as “Illyrian”, i.e. South Slav by the narrator, the round dance takes place over a number of striking historical stations which – as the author undoubtedly knows while writing his essay in 1942 – turned out to be fatal for the first Yugoslav state. Initially, three events are named as those preceding the state building and shaping it in a long-lasting, mostly negative fashion: the Thessaloniki trial, at which the leaders of the secret organization “Black Hand” were sentenced to death by a Serbian military tribunal; the massacres committed by Serbian troops on South Slav war volunteers in Odessa in 1917; and the London Secret Treaty of 1915, stipulating the entry of Italy into the war on the Entente side, in exchange for large territorial gains on the Eastern Adriatic coast. The ring-dance speaks of the activities that Drinković and Kvaternik engaged in the provisional South Slav state until the unification with Serbia on December 1, 1918; but it also refers to the tragic event which took place only a few days later when, during an anti-Serbian protest in the main square of Zagreb a number of people were killed by the police. The following historical stations of the ring-dance cover the political developments which marked the newly founded state’s path toward authoritarian rule over the 1920s: the anti-Communist measures banning the CPY, the only political organization successful in the whole of Yugoslavia, followed by King Aleksandar’s dictatorship imposed in January of 1929, resulting not only in the suspension of parliamentary order until the second half of the 1930s, but also in the strengthening of both right-wing and left-wing radical forces, as well as in the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations in Yugoslavia. The ghostly round dance continues through the well-known prisons (Mitrovica, Zenica, Lepoglava) where the regime’s opponents of different political persuasions were held and harassed, until the collapse of the Yugoslav Kingdom in April 1941, when the Royal Government went into exile in London, while its military supporters remaining in the country under General Draža Mihailović soon began collaborating with Italian and German invaders. In Ustasha Croatia however, a puppet state by the grace of the Third Reich and fascist Italy (symbolically represented by Siegfried Kasche, the German envoy who strongly backed the Pavelić regime, and the Italian aristocrat Aimone de Spoleto, declared King of Croatia by the Ustashe, even though he eventually never assumed this role), the ring-dance hits its basest point with the establishment of the extermination camp at Jasenovac.

In Krleža’s *Danse macabre*, stretching from the downfall of the Danube Monarchy to the catastrophes of the Second World War, we may recognize all of the political forces and tendencies that exerted a significant or, in the course of time, even dominant influence in post-Habsburg Croatia, as well as in other Central and Eastern European countries. How accurately the post-imperial conditions and their destructive potential for violence are staged by Krleža is also indicated by several recent historical studies, whose authors sometimes – as already indicated before – illustrate their own theses with quotations from *Drunken November Night*, for instance the Irish historian John Paul Newman in his works on post-imperial violence in the South Slav countries.²⁰

A comparative review of Newman’s historical studies and Krleža’s autobiographical essay provides an insight into how history and literature – despite their fundamentally different

²⁰Cf. Newman (2010), 249; Newman (2015), 253–254.



discourses – can achieve corresponding conclusions. Both the historian and the writer focus on the transition from the “imperial” to the “post-imperial” conditions in Croatia focusing particularly on the behavior of the political elites during the disintegration of Austria-Hungary and the emergence of the South Slav joint state. Newman is, on the one hand, concerned with questions relating to how officers and soldiers returning from the front behaved in a suddenly created power vacuum and, on the other hand, with the impact of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary events in other Central and Eastern European countries on the situation in contemporary Croatia, with special emphasis on the use of violence. Similar to several other researchers in recent times,²¹ Newman assumes that radical political tendencies of the early post-imperial period – regarded by authorities as threatening since 1917/18 and subsequently fought against, at least since 1923 considered as defeated and conquered – reappeared in the 1930s as an acute menace to the state order and in many ways shaped political trends in the ensuing period and their violent continuation in the Second World War.

It is highly revealing in this context that the historian’s research findings *grosso modo* confirm the diagnoses of the writer. However, in some respects they differ from one another, for instance in Krleža’s poetic portrayal of Croatian post-imperial conditions, suggesting a politically and socially extremely turbulent time (PNN, 133, 137); Newman, on the other hand, points out – referring to the international context – that the consequences of this period were by no means as dramatic in Croatia as they were in some other Central and East European countries.²² And yet, as he shows, the transition from the Austro-Hungarian to the South Slav monarchy was not at all a peaceful one; on the contrary, in many regions of Croatia, especially in the northern rural areas, the period witnessed uncontrolled lawlessness, mainly caused by the activities of the so-called ‘Green cadres’. The preferred targets of these armed groups, consisting of deserter soldiers, were the nobility, civil servants and landowners, and in many cases the rest of the population was also subjected to their violence. Although politicized members of the ‘Green cadres’ argued for a socialist revolution according to Lenin’s model, this movement in Croatia rarely went beyond a spontaneous and chaotic form of organization. Krleža’s view of the ‘Green cadres’ is, however, highly ambivalent: while in *Drunken November Night* this phenomenon is referred to only marginally, in order to illustrate the “dramatic days [...] when the whole country burned in a mindless fire” (PNN, 149), and in the author’s first ‘tea-party’ text, in the newspaper article *The Black and Yellow Scandal*, it is presented as “an element threatening every form of civilization”,²³ but in some works published shortly afterwards, for example in the drama *Vučjak (Wolfhound, 1923)*, the ‘Green cadres’ movement appears, notwithstanding all its contradictions, as a “missed revolutionary situation”.²⁴

As Newman notes, the relatively low intensity of politically and socially motivated violence in Croatia between 1917/18 and 1923 was due to three factors: the military superiority of the Serbian/Yugoslav army and the relatively successful integration of former Habsburg officers into its ranks; the effective police surveillance and repression of politically radical movements by the new state authorities; and, last but not least, the high popularity of a pacifist, anti-militarist

²¹See among others: Gerwarth and Manela (2014), Gerwarth (2011), Bartov and Weitz (2013), Roshwald (2001).

²²Cf. Newman (2015), 139–140.

²³Bogišić (1993), 104.

²⁴Cf. Io. B. (= Ivo Banac) 1999, 540.



agrarian movement after 1918 – Stjepan Radić's Croatian Peasant Party.²⁵ The first two aspects of the post-imperial era are also discussed in detail in Krleža's text, but the third, emphasized by Newman as being essential to the absence of a mass use of violence, remains unmentioned in the *Drunken November Night*, apparently because the Radić's Party emerged as the leading political force in Croatia only after the foundation of the South Slav kingdom.²⁶

It has already been mentioned that the Communist Party was nearly completely destroyed by draconian laws and harsh police measures in the early 1920s. In a short period of time, this mass party was transformed into a small, but very vital illegal organization fighting a dark and bitter battle against the state authorities of the SHS Kingdom until its collapse in 1941. While the revolutionary Communist Party's influence was concentrated above all in the larger urban centers, rural Croatia was mainly influenced by the pacifist message of the Peasant Party, whose leader, Radić, tended to compare the newly founded Yugoslavia to the unloved Austro-Hungary and to portray the 'occupation' of Croatia by the Serbian army in 1918 as the return of militarism.

The Peasant Party, quickly transformed into the largest Croatian political organization, differed substantially from the far-right political formations, which – similar to the Communists, albeit based on opposing motives – were committed to armed resistance against the Serb-dominated state. The core of these groupings consisted of ex-Habsburg officers and representatives of the right-wing of the nationalist Croatian Party of Rights, the so-called Frankists, who had formed the organization Croatian Committee in Hungarian exile as early as 1919 and, aiming to enforce an Anti-Yugoslav revolution, also immediately founded a paramilitary voluntary formation, the Croatian Legion. However – as stressed by Newman²⁷ – they were unable to attract the former Habsburg officers who had joined the Yugoslav army, nor did they manage to exploit for their political goals Croats' widespread dissatisfaction with the new state framework.

A considerable increase in activities of the extreme right-wing groups can be observed from the late 1920s onwards. This was a period when, following the assassination of Radić in the Belgrade Parliament in 1928 and the proclamation of royal dictatorship in January 1929, the Ustasha movement was founded. Its leader, Ante Pavelić, went into exile and from there organised anti-Yugoslav terror operations both at home and abroad. As Krleža and Newman²⁸ both agree, the wave of violence which began at this point, went on to spread once again and intensified even further over the 1930s, cannot be fully accounted for, even if we ignore the radical upheavals between 1917 and 1923. It was already suggested that the emergence of the Ustasha state in 1941 should also be considered in this context, and that it was precisely the former k.u.k. officers like Kvaternik who contributed considerably to this process.

When referring to the radical political tendencies of the post-imperial era, the enthusiastic praise for Lenin and the October Revolution in the *Drunken November Night* could appear as

²⁵Cf. Newman (2015), 115–146.

²⁶Krleža discusses the Radić phenomenon in several other texts; however, always in a highly ambivalent manner. Cf. esp. Krleža (1957).

²⁷Cf. Newman (2015), 129–136.

²⁸Cf. Newman (2015), 176–183.



confusing, a circumstance that prompted the consternated party guests to throw out not only the “I”-narrator in the literary text, but also the author himself in historical reality. Throughout his life Krleža not only remained closely associated with the communist movement, but also trusted that the ideals of the Enlightenment could be realized only by means of a revolutionary ideology. As Zoran Kravar rightly claims, he experienced history as “a permanent crisis to be resolved only through a dramatic and vehement turnaround”.²⁹ Krleža’s poetic vision of desirable developments in the world’s history, an essential component of his expressionist poetics, is usually associated with ingenious individuals of the Nietzschean type, such as Jesus, Columbus or Michelangelo, a figure gallery to which the author added Lenin following the outbreak of the October Revolution. By including him in the “cult of an epochal individual action” – as Kravar explains – and praising his “revolutionary act as crucial for the salvation of mankind”, Krleža, like many other intellectuals of the 20th century, also bases his commitment “on the idea of the feasibility of a finite, inherently non-conflictual, rationally founded human society, beyond history and its supposed negativity”.³⁰

But how to reconcile this utopian idea with the view of history as an eternal recurrence of the ever-same? According to Krleža, the cyclical view of history refers to the previous period of time, while leaving “a utopian door” open “to the future”.³¹ However, as *A Drunken November Night 1918*, as well as the Lenin essays by the author show,³² his visions regarding the future rarely assume a precise form and hardly ever proceed beyond an abstract appraisal for the historic example of the October Revolution and its leader. A similar attitude prevails also in Krleža’s report on his journey to Russia in 1924 (*Izlet u Rusiju – A Trip to Russia*, 1926) where, although expressing himself with a high degree of affirmation on the idea of the socialist revolution, at the same time he also offers numerous critical observations concerning the early phase of the Soviet Union. Even more critically he will react to the demands of the leading Yugoslav party ideologists in order to align his writing with the poetics of socialist realism prescribed by the Soviet cultural policy. It was precisely the insistence on his modernist conception of art, as well as on his undogmatic political positions that would gradually alienate Krleža from the Communist Party in the 1930s and eventually push him into isolation on the Croatian left.³³ Krleža’s skepticism toward the communist movement can also be seen in his mocking remark, as mentioned earlier, stating that between 1941 and 1945 he was equally endangered by ‘Dido’ as by ‘Đido’. Thus there can be no doubt that here, once again, we may observe the author’s conviction that human behavior patterns remain unchanged throughout the course of history and that historical processes are determined by a dynamic of their own.

For Krleža, therefore, history remains marked by the experience of contingency, a conception of history that can be fulfilled only by means of mutual reflection on present and past. Such an attitude to history also appears in his autobiographical staging of the ‘tea party’ scandal. From the statements and behavior of the inebriated party guests the author had clearly anticipated as

²⁹Cf. Zo. Kr. (= Zoran Kravar) 1993, 540.

³⁰Kravar (1993), 540.

³¹Žmegač (2001), 13–14.

³²On Lenin see the following essays by Krleža: *Nad grobom Vladimira Iljiča Uljanova Lenjina* (1924), *O Lenjinu* (1926), *Vladimir Iljič Lenjin: O dijalektici* (1927).

³³Cf. Lasić (1970), Visković (2001).



early as November 1918 the disastrous consequences of the hastily conducted state unification, a circumstance upon which, as he realizes a quarter of a century later, he was not mistaken and which he now tries to recapture in his autobiographical essay. The disintegration of the compromised imperial ruling system has not resulted in a union of equal peoples in which the South Slavs could have advanced toward national, political and social emancipation. On the contrary, the Habsburg Empire had been replaced by a small-scale post-imperial entity based on a domination structure, an entity that, as Krleža knows when writing *A Drunken November Night* in 1942, was to perish two decades later under the weight of its own contradictions. By including the time when the text was written, the Second World War, and the terror reign of the Ustashe, and in doing so particularly referring to the conversion of many former Austro-Hungarian officers to the side of various fascist movements, Krleža also emphatically reveals his own conception of history, according to which the historical events of the time appear to be a groping in circles, an eternal recurrence in which human stupidity is coupled with an excessive use of power and violence.

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