

**PATRIARCH GAVRILO DOZIC AND IDEAL OF FREEDOM.  
YUGOSLAVIA: COUP D'ETAT IN 1941**

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**Abstract:** *In 1941 difficult situation led Yugoslavia to sign Tripartite Agreement with the Third Reich. Patriarch Gavriilo Dozic couldn't imagine agreement with Germany by which Yugoslavia would become part of Axis powers. In his opinion he believed that freedom is the most important value of one's nation and it shouldn't be given to anybody at any price. Coup d'etat that happened in Yugoslavia few days after the agreement between Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Third Reich has been anticipated as a patriotic move in order to safeguard freedom. Patriarch believed the same. Unfortunately, sudden attack of Germany against Yugoslavia led the country to the civil war and millions of new victims.*

**Keywords:** Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Third Reich, coup d'etat, Serbia, patriarch, freedom.

In 1941, the situation on the battlefields of Europe was victorious for the Third Reich. Germany, together with its allies had under his rule nearly all of Europe. Some countries have been taken by force while others voluntarily joined the Axis powers. The only force that was still resisting to Germany was the United Kingdom. Due to agreement with the Soviet Union from 1939, Germany had the open road to England. On the Balkans, Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Greece represented still independent states, non-aligned to Axis powers. Other countries have already become members of „German Europe”. At the beginning of 1941, Kingdom of Yugoslavia was surrounded by German forces and its allies. Political situation within Yugoslavia was even more complicated especially because of inner political struggles. Croatia for many years was asking for more independence. In 1939, Croatian politicians reached their goal gaining almost independent entity within Yugoslavia. Agreement Cvetkovic-Macekin August of 1939 (on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September) settled Croatian question for a while.

Kingdom of Yugoslavia has been ruled by Serbian dynasty of Karadjordjevic family. In 1934 the first King of Yugoslavia, Alexander, has been killed in France by separatist forces within Yugoslavia. At the time his son Peter was only 11 years old, so the ruler became Prince Paul Karadjordjevic until Peter reaches maturity. For many reasons, Serbian crown struggled to keep Yugoslavia together. Serbia still has not recovered from the collapse of the First World War in which it lost 1.250.000 people (402.435 soldiers and 845.000 civilians, 500.000

disabled persons).<sup>1</sup> Thus, Serbia has lost around 35% of its total population in the war from 1914-1918, and 60% of male population. These losses were „*the level of oppression all over the nation and caused permanent and uncontrolled consequences in a patriarchal society of Serbian villages [...] Years of wars (1912-1913, Balkan wars; 1914-1918, WWI), wars of liberation and unification (1912-1918), as the researchers noted, exhausted the last energy reserves and „squeezed” the Serbian people... Loss of generations encouraged the bad selection in every segment of life bringing less capable people in offices*”.<sup>2</sup> After the WWI Serbia liberated other Slavic territories and constituted Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes which would change name in Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. The new country was much bigger than Serbia with its 247.542 km<sup>2</sup> and population of almost 12 million people in 1921.

### **Yugoslavia 1941**

Even though for someone from outside Yugoslavia could look as a strong and huge country at the beginning of 1940, inside it was troubled state, divided with so many political and ethnic issues. In 1941 the UK by all means wanted to weaken the strength of German force against them. For Britain to ease the pressure it would be ideal to find a new battlefield in Europe. Kingdom of Yugoslavia became ideal choice, especially because Prince Paul grew up in England. Even though being anglophile, Prince Paul understood the position of his country, which was surrounded by Axis countries, and decided to sign an agreement on accession to the Tripartite Pact with the Third Reich. He spoke privately with Hitler on March 4, 1941,<sup>3</sup> trying to make the Pact most suitable for Yugoslavia. In other words, he didn't want to allow Yugoslavia to be in any way involved into the war or used as a territory for Axis members to attack other countries.

Military situation for Yugoslavia in 1941 was also very difficult. General Pesic of Yugoslav Army at the meeting with prince Paul and other members of Royal Council (6 March 1941) announced that in case of war, Germans would quickly occupy the entire northern part of Yugoslavia, taking three major cities: Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. The army should withdraw to the mountains of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it could stand the attack for six weeks. After that, with no food

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<sup>1</sup> Ljubodrag Dimic, *Srbi i Jugoslavija*, Beograd, 1998, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>3</sup> Nil Balfur, Seli Mekeç, *Knez Pavle Karadjordjevic*, Beograd, 1990, p. 147.

and ammunition, no assistance from allies, army would collapse soon.<sup>4</sup> Agreement with Germany was still in progress and delayed due to the complex political circumstances. Romania in late 1940 joined Axis powers, while Bulgaria signed the Tripartite Pact on 1 March 1941 which put more pressure on Yugoslavia. Still Yugoslavia asked for more delay on the matter asking more time and more conditions trying to avoid the war. Surprisingly, the Third Reich has agreed to all the conditions of the Royal Government and the date for the signing of the pact was determined on 25 March in 1941.

### **Patriarch Gavrilo**

Serbian Patriarch at that time, Gavrilo Dozic (1938-1950) had a very clear position on government's decision to sign the Tripartite Pact. After the WWI and struggles against Austrians and Germans, majority of Serbs couldn't imagine any kind of agreement that would put Serbs on opposite side from France and England. Patriarch Gavrilo felt this trouble of people. It was unimaginable for most of Serbs that after so many victims in WWI against Germans, they could reach agreement with them. Patriarch Gavrilo even before the Tripartite Pact has been reached send very clear message in his Christmas Message of 1941 (7<sup>th</sup> of January 1941). In that message Patriarch called the arm forces to be proud on their history not being ashamed and do not dare to betray their proud history.<sup>5</sup> It was his intention to call to unity all the nation in order to be ready to defend the country. Tripartite Pact in his opinion obviously wouldn't be honorable option for a nation.

Together with Holy Synod, Patriarch prepared a *Memorandum* which has been submitted to the government on March 19, 1941.<sup>6</sup> Few days later, on 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1941, the *Memorandum* has been handed personally to Prince Paul.<sup>7</sup> From the many writings of Patriarch Gavrilo, we can now conclude that he possibly believed in a defensive war which could accelerate the unification of Yugoslavia in front of enemy at the national level. However, he completely forgot the reality of the threat and the inability of the defense. On 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, Prince Paul invited the Patriarch in order to present him the bitter situation in the country, politically and military. After all the facts presented at the meeting, Paul

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> *Glasnik SPC*, LXI/6, 1980, Beograd, p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> Gavrilo Dozic, *Memoari Patrijarha Srpskog Gavrila*, Beograd, SFAIROS, 1990, p. 216.

<sup>7</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve 3*, Beograd, BIGZ, 1991, p. 32.

expected to get the support from the Patriarch in favor of the agreement. Also, Paul Karadjordjevic believed that the Patriarch could calm down the people after knowing the real situation in the country. At the meeting, Patriarch Gavriilo also spoke and according to some, his speech ignored the hopeless reality. He spoke once a more persistently appealing to the heroic examples of the Serbian past, the feeling of national honor and pride, and that is „*better to be grave than a slave*”.<sup>8</sup>

Great demonstrations exploded in Belgrade on 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1941, two days after the signing of the Tripartite Pact between Yugoslavia and the Third Reich. People demonstrated against the Agreement with Hitler. Today we know that behind the „*people's demonstrations*” Great Britain pulled their strings, defending their interests on the Balkans. On the day of the signing of the Pact, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Great Britain, Anthony Eden says to his deputy in Belgrade to take what is necessary, every measure in order to change the government or regime in Belgrade.<sup>9</sup> Churchill himself telegraphed to Campbell (MP in Belgrade) on 24<sup>th</sup> of March in an attempt to prevent the signing of the pact.<sup>10</sup>

Prince Paul wasn't happy by signing the Agreement, but the situation demanded this as the only solution. Joachim von Ribbentrop, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Third Reich, described the situation surrounding the signing of the Pact more like a funeral than a ceremony.<sup>11</sup>

### **Patriotism**

In moments of such crucial decisions, Patriarch Gavriilo has become a focal point for opposition in their intention to overthrow the Government. He himself pointed out that the Government of Yugoslavia does not reflect the Serbs, because the real representatives of Serbian people do not sit there. In order to increase the pressure on the Government, Patriarch conveyed a special session of the Holy Synod on 27<sup>th</sup> of March. Upon his return from the Third Reich, the president of the Government of Yugoslavia, Dragisa Cvetkovic, phoned to Patriarch asking him about that special Synod. At the same time, Cvetković wanted to show to Patriarch the agreement and its benefits. They set the meeting at 9 p. m. on 26<sup>th</sup> of March. On the same day, around 7 p. m.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Nil Balfur, Seli Mekej, *Knez Pavle Karadjordjevic*, p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Velimir Terzic, *Slom Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1941*, Beograd, Narodna knjiga, 1982, p. 433.

(26<sup>th</sup> of March 1941) the Patriarch called Cvetkovic and told him: „*Mr. President, lets postpone the meeting for tomorrow*”. Even though Cvetkovic insisted that they should meet, the Patriarch answered: „*Why should we hurry, we'll probably live tomorrow*”.<sup>12</sup>

In the early morning of March 27<sup>th</sup> 1941 Yugoslavia experienced a coup d'état with the generous help of the English Service, the project is supposedly managed by SOE (Special Operations Executive) whose headquarters were in Belgrade.<sup>13</sup> Addressing the parliament on 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1941, Patriarch Gavriilo said concerning the coup d'état: „*Last night's act saved the honor of our nation and state, and therefore we can only bless this work*”.<sup>14</sup> Churchill responded similarly on this news, „*early this morning the Yugoslav nation found its soul*”.<sup>15</sup> The Patriarch immediately addressed the whole nation over the radio, blessing clergy and people. His message was filled with national romantic excurses and „*plenty of archaic phrases*”.<sup>16</sup> In his speech, the Patriarch recalled the history again and addressed exclusively Serbs, although Yugoslavia has long been a state in which the Orthodox constituted approximately 50% of the population. After the WWI Serbian church lost her status of the state church experiencing difficulty to comprehend the new role and mission Yugoslavia.<sup>17</sup>

In his *Memoirs* the Patriarch highly evaluated the significance of the events of March 27,<sup>18</sup> the events that have taken the country into the quick breakdown and bloody inner conflict which lasted from 1941-1945 and took around 1.000.000 deaths. These events helped Britain and delayed attack on USSR. But for Yugoslavia, these events led the country into the war that lasted 11 days, from 6<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> of April 1941, and civil war that lasted until 1945. Today we know that the Tripartite Pact may wouldn't prevent conquest of the country by Hitler. However, the signing of the Pact was an attempt to save Yugoslavia from inner conflicts and many human victims. At the end, we know today that rejection of the Pact led to quicker destruction of Yugoslavia and Serbia. For a few days the country was torn apart, and Serbs suffered the genocide in the so called *Independent State of Croatia*.

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<sup>12</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve* 3, p. 603.

<sup>13</sup> Nil Balfur, Seli Mekej, *Knez Pavle Karadjordjevic*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>14</sup> *Гласник СПЦ*, година LXI, бр. 6, стр. Београд, 1980, p. 136.

<sup>15</sup> Velimir Terzic, *Slom Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1941*, p. 476.

<sup>16</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve* 2, p. 604.

<sup>17</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve* 3, pp. 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Gavriilo Dozic, *Memoari Patrijarha Srpskog Gavriila*, p. 272.

## Immediate Consequence

On early morning, 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1941 Axis powers attacked Yugoslavia suddenly with no war proclamation. The bombing of Belgrade was the largest one up to that time and devastating. Patriarch only at that point realized all the power of the Third Reich. Such conclusion we can get from his notes. The new Government which took the power on 27<sup>th</sup> of March immediately left Belgrade. In these tragic moments, political leadership quickly abandoned the country.<sup>19</sup> Around 2 p. m. on 6<sup>th</sup> of April, the Patriarch himself drove through the ruins of Belgrade in the direction of the monastery of Rakovica.<sup>20</sup> The Patriarchate building itself was demolished (water supply was destroyed). The Patriarch tried to get in touch with the fleeing Government, which was moving in the direction of city Uzice. Therefore he left monastery and followed the Government led by General Simovic (leader of the coup d'état).<sup>21</sup> Patriarch still believed that that Yugoslav troops would move to Montenegro and parts of Herzegovina in order to make more efficient defense. For that reason, he decided to go to the Monastery Ostrog (Montenegro) where he arrived on 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1941.<sup>22</sup>

On 15<sup>th</sup> of April around 7 a. m. Patriarch Gavriilo met General Simovic. At that moment, Simovic told the Patriarch that the situation is lost. „*We do not have any options, nor the means to oppose the German military forces, particularly motorization and armored vehicles, against which we have no means to defend ourselves*”.<sup>23</sup> Patriarch himself wrote: „*Thus ended our tragic defense, which had no chances of success*”.<sup>24</sup> It was his confession about the collapse of politics from the 27<sup>th</sup> of March.

## Epilogue

Until 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1941 Patriarch was in the monastery Ostrog when German forces came and arrested him. Patriarch himself described in his *Memoirs* his imprisonment. German authorities transferred him to Sarajevo where they organized the trial. The text of the indictment is most hostile to Patriarch's work on the destruction of the Tripartite

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<sup>19</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve* 3, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Gavriilo Dozic, *Memoari Patrijarha Srpskog Gavriila*, p. 278.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 279.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 290.

Pact.<sup>25</sup> He was accused of helping overthrow of the government Cvetkovic-Macek and leading Yugoslavia into the war.<sup>26</sup>

At the trial, the Patriarch held proudly and he didn't allow himself to lose control over the situation. After reading the charges he was allowed to write his defense. On 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1941, he read his speech before the German interrogators. The speech presented a detailed defense, which eventually turned into accusation against Germans. Despite the difficult situation, the Patriarch was extremely calmed in order to convert his trial into the attack and accusation of Germans.<sup>27</sup> A few days later, on 1<sup>st</sup> of May he was transferred by plane to Belgrade. In Belgrade he was detained in the basement of a large building, where he was again subjected to harassment.

At the beginning of the second half of May, the Patriarch was transferred to the building of former District Court.<sup>28</sup> One time he was held outdoors in the courtyard. The mass, which was located in the courtyard shouted from all sides: „*Long Live His Holiness!*”.<sup>29</sup> In those moments he began to hold his speech to the gathered crowd, but was soon interrupted. Gestapo major told him: „*If you still continue to operate and provoke your Serbs, we will apply to you the strictest legal measures. You are a boring person, and it is difficult to cope with you. Remember, this is your last warning*”.<sup>30</sup>

In the courtyard, outdoor, Patriarch spent five days and five nights in the rain and cold weather. Every day he was interrogated, but when his health was completely endangered he stopped responding to the interrogation. Only then the Gestapo allowed doctors to examine him and determine what it is. After several locations, Patriarch has been moved to the monastery of Vojlovica.<sup>31</sup>

In September 1944 Patriarch Gavriilo and Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic have been moved into the concentration camp Dachau.<sup>32</sup> Patriarch wrote: „*We were both so exhausted by the time that we were for nothing.*

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<sup>25</sup> The text of the Tripartite Pact at: Nil Balfur, Seli Mekej, *Knez Pavle Karadjordjevic*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 299.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 301-309

<sup>28</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve* 3, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Gavriilo Dozic, *Memoari Patrijarha Srpskog Gavriila*, p. 313.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 314.

<sup>31</sup> The letter of Dusan Dozic to the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox church from 21<sup>st</sup> of May 1943.

<sup>32</sup> Milan D. Janković, *Episkop Nikolajknjiga*, I, Beograd, 2002, p. 294.

*But the Germans are not taking care of it, they put me on arrival in the notorious barracks, where life would be impossible”*<sup>33</sup>

Only in 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1946 Patriarch arrived in Belgrade. At the airport the Patriarch refused to give any statements.<sup>34</sup> He stayed on the throne of Serbian Patriarchs until 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1950 trying to accommodate and harmonize the relationship with new communist government with more or less success. Even today, many believe that Patriarch was poisoned by communist regime because of his brave stance in front of the regime.

The time of Patriarch Gavriilo Dozic belongs to the era of transition from one epoch into another one. Patriarch Gavriilo began his service in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, he survived the period of Nazism to continue his service at the time of Communism. The colossal changes that took place in a very short period of time made the position of the Patriarch exceptionally delicate.

The period before the Second World War was tragic in the time of the Patriarch Gavriilo. After the events of 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1941, we can grasp the size of tragedy that came afterwards.<sup>35</sup> Immediately after the coup d'état Yugoslavia has been defeated and destructed from 1941-1945. Death toll during the Second World War is higher than 1.000.000. It would be reasonable to say that Patriarch was led by noble reasons to support overthrow of the Government. He probably couldn't anticipate the scale of destruction and killing in Yugoslavia during the war or defeat of the Yugoslav Army in only 11 days. What we see afterwards is that Patriarch became much more cautious in his political orientation. Thus, during the period of detention, the Patriarch refused to condemn the communist movement, just as he had refused to take part in a congress which condemned Bolshevism,<sup>36</sup> just before the end of the war (the congress was conducted from Berlin).

After the war, Patriarch Gavriilo showed incredible flexibility and a desire for coexistence with the new communist government, to save the priesthood and people from new sufferings. It was, perhaps unconsciously, the recognition of errors made in time prior to war. But it would be also unfair to say that his decisions were driven consciously in order to start war with Germany with consequence of deaths of millions

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<sup>33</sup> Gavriilo Dozic, *Memoari Patrijarha Srpskog Gavriila*, p. 356.

<sup>34</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve* 3, p. 181.

<sup>35</sup> On demographic catastrophe of Serbia see: Kosta Nikolic, *Jedna izgubljena istorija*, Beograd, 2016, pp. 373-384.

<sup>36</sup> Djoko Slijepcevic, *Istorija Srpskepravoslavne Crkve* 3, p. 46.



in Yugoslavia. It is more important that Patriarch wanted to express his respect of freedom as the most important thing in one's life. That was also in line with orthodox theology, freedom of soul accompanies freedom of body, freedom of soul requests freedom of occupation in political terms. At the time, that was immensely important in case of Serbia. After huge death toll in WWI, Patriarch elevated and appreciated freedom more than ever before. He tried to remind and inspire people to love and safeguard freedom which has been paid with enormous sacrifices of society in Serbia.

