

King Nikola and the Territorial Expansion of Montenegro, 1914–1920

Abstract: This article discusses the abortive efforts of King Nikola of Montenegro to achieve territorial expansion for his country during the First World War. Although he was a believer in the unification of Serbdom, he wanted to achieve it under his leadership rather than that of the Serbian Karadjordjević dynasty, and therefore had no intention of letting Montenegro be simply merged with Serbia and his family pushed into the background. Therefore, King Nikola campaigned not just for the preservation of Montenegro as an independent state, but also for its considerable territorial expansion, mostly at the expense of Austria-Hungary, and also at that of Serbia and Albania. He did not desist from his endeavours even at the time of his exile following the capitulation and occupation of Montenegro in 1916; on the contrary, it was then that his demands were most comprehensive. However, he could not resist the reality on the ground during and in the wake of the war, and all his efforts remained useless.

Keywords: King Nikola, Montenegro, territorial expansion, First World War

In the course of his long political activity on the Serbian and Balkan scene King Nikola Petrović-Njegoš conducted a lot of negotiations, put forward and declined many suggestions or proposed solutions and accepted some compromises. This was perfectly natural for a man who autocratically exercised his sovereign duties, had no government capable of imposing its will and viewpoint or associates who could be entrusted with delicate missions.

Since he was intent on playing the leading role in Serbdom and carrying out its unification, King Nikola found the economic, political and military strengthening of Montenegro of utmost importance. During the first phase of his reign, still as Prince, he believed that in this way he could secure the influence in political decision-making for himself and Montenegro. To begin with, he believed that the occasional expansion of Montenegro into the neighbouring territories could enhance his, and his family's, reputation and at the same time extinguish or



diminish that of other pretenders (the Obrenović and Karadjordjević families). For that reason, he incessantly interfered with the surrounding lands (Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo and Metohija, the Adriatic coast) and, in some cases, embroiled himself in ill-conceived undertakings which, due to the opposition of Great Powers, ended in withdrawal, suspicions and diplomatic and political defeats. It is safe to assume that prior to 1914 that motif was one of the most important in the shaping of his policy.

The outbreak of the world war as well as its subsequent course convinced King Nikola and a few of his closest associates that such policy was not realistic but they did not give up territorial expansion. After all, all other countries, the participants in the war, Great Powers and smaller states alike, including those in the Balkans, expounded the need for the change of borders on account of ethnic or strategic considerations. King Nikola resorted to all kinds of reasons (economical, strategic, political, the loyalty to the Allied cause) to justify his demands. Moreover, as a supreme commander of the Montenegrin army he frequently influenced the making of military plans which reflected to a large extent his own territorial desiderata — the operations in Bay of Cattaro (the Gulf of Kotor), Dalmatia, Herzegovina, Bosnia, Northern Albania and Scutari.

The territorial expansion of Montenegro, in King Nikola's view, could get that country out of the encirclement in which it found itself upon entering the war and get it rid of the close political and military co-operation with Serbia. King Nikola was quick to realise that the most dangerous threat to the future of Montenegro and his own family was coming from Serbia and her dynasty; he was aware of the prevalent mood of the Montenegrin population, the weakness of his state and army and the Allied suspicions of him. All this induced him to hurriedly respond and defend his country by clamouring for its territorial pretensions. He made effort to do so through the mediation of some Great Powers — Italy and Russia.

King Nikola's first step was to sound Russia out. In early December 1914, the Russian minister at Cetinje, Aleksandar Girs, reported that King's close associates spoke of the necessity for preservation of Montenegro's independence and territorial augmentation to be realised at the end of the war. There was some talk of the annexation of Bay of Cattaro and the stretch of the coast up to Dubrovnik. Girs found such ambitions to be "fantastical", i.e. unacceptable and badly received among the people.¹ As it

¹ Girs to Sazonov, Cetinje, 10 December 1914; *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya v epohu imperijalizma*, ser. III, I-X (Moscow 1931-1937), vol. VI-2 [hereafter MO], 205-206; Dragovan Šepić, *Italija, Saveznici i jugoslovensko pitanje 1914-1918* (Zagreb 1970), 40, 106. In November 1914, Petar Plamenac, the foreign minister of Montenegro, discussed the incorporation of Scutari.

turned out later, that was the minimal programme of Montenegro's sovereign. His whetted appetites took their final shape when Italy decided to enter the war on the side of the Allies in the spring of 1915. Prior to that, and as soon as he found out about the Italian decision, King Nikola sent to Russia his envoy, General Mitar Martinović, in order to win over the Russian court and government for his pretensions. The Martinović mission formally had another objective — to secure regular supplies of arms and food for Montenegro. In fact, the political agenda was more important, although Martinović's efforts remained abortive. The Russian government and military circles refused the Montenegrin requests, and Crown Prince Danilo complained to the Russian military attaché at Cetinje about the support extended to Serbia.² According to the information provided by the Russian minister to Serbia Trubetskoy and his military attaché Potapov, Martinović's mission was extremely important. The former claimed that it aimed to persuade the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian army, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievich to take into consideration the territorial pretensions of Montenegro and, in particular, to separate them from those of Serbia on the occasion of the conclusion of peace. Potapov believed that Martinović intended to inform the Grand Duke about the plan hatched by the Italian Queen Jelena, the daughter of King Nikola, which envisaged the strengthening of Montenegro and the weakening of Serbia. That would be realised upon the evacuation of Italian troops through the occupation of southern Dalmatia by Montenegrin forces and the territorial expansion of Montenegro at Serbia's expense. Sergei Sazonov, the foreign minister, let the Emperor know about this plan and warned that the acceptance of the Montenegrin King's demands would lead to a split between Serbia and Montenegro and therefore his requests should be declined.³ The Emperor approved of Sazonov's attitude.

Besides, the Serbian officers attached to the General Staff of the Montenegrin army notified the Serbian Supreme Command that King Nikola had prepared a proclamation to the people of Bosnia, Herzegovina and Dalmatia calling them to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with Montenegrins and Italians. This made Colonel Petar Pešić think that King Nikola had

² Dimitrije Vujović, *Ujedinjenje Crne Gore i Srbije* (Titograd 1962), 106–107; Šepić, *Italija*, 106–107.

³ Sazonov to Nikolai II, St. Petersburg, 25 April/8 May 1915 [two dates are given according to Julian and Gregorian calendar respectively — the former was in official use in Montenegro until 1919], MO, III, VII-2, 384–385; Šepić, *Italija*, 106–107. Serbian diplomacy was aware of Montenegro's territorial pretensions. In early May 1915, King Nikola wanted the following territories: Albania up to the Mati river, Herzegovina in its old boundaries, Bay of Cattaro up to the Neretva river. King Nikola hoped to push out Serbia by introducing Italy in his political game.

made to some secret arrangement with the Italians at the expense of Serbia. Therefore, he asked Field-Marshal Radomir Putnik, Chief of the Serbian Supreme Command, to let him know in which direction the Montenegrin troops should be deployed in the impending operations: to Sarajevo, Mostar, or Dubrovnik. Pešić insisted that King Nikola should be made clear that he had to co-operate in accordance with the agreed plan of the two Supreme Commands and forced to “reveal his clandestine negotiations”. A week later, General Božidar Janković, Chief of the Montenegrin Supreme Command, discussed this matter with King Nikola. The latter read him part of the declaration in which he encouraged Bosnians, Herzegovinians and Dalmatians not to be desponded and call them to assist the Serbian, Montenegrin and Italian armies. The proclamation spoke of the mighty Russia, the protector of Serbdom and Slavdom, Italy, the bearer of the principle of equality of nations, the armies of which would fight along with the Serbian and Montenegrin armies. The King presented himself as a bearer of freedom and peace and the unifier of Serbdom. General Janković claimed that King Nikola impatiently expected Italy’s entry into the war convinced that the operations of Italian troops in Dalmatia and Boka would make easier the actions of Montenegrin forces in Kotor and Krivošije, the conquest of Trebinje and Bileća, and the thrust into Herzegovina and Dalmatia. The Chief of the Montenegrin Supreme Command warned that King Nikola was in a hurry to make an appearance with his troops in the conquered regions due to his vanity and political reasons; he even queried if he could send his troops in Bosnia, in the direction of Sarajevo, a suggestion which General Janković discouraged. Finally, General Janković suggested that the announcement of the proclamation be prevented — he had already been working to that end.⁴

No doubt King Nikola missed no opportunity to achieve his intentions concerning the annexation of new regions to his own country. In doing so, he did not take into account the resistance he met with (Serbia, Russia), the uncertainty which Italy’s entry into the war entailed or the hostility of the population in Dalmatia and Dubrovnik towards his liberation intentions. Given the all-round opposition he encountered, King Nikola’s policy was bound to fail, giving rise in the process to the feeling of enmity and distrust towards him which he later would not be able to dispel. The issue of Montenegro’s territorial expansion undoubtedly drew King Nikola’s attention during the war and afterwards, and he was supported in that endeavour by his governments and ministers. Far from extraordinary, such preoccupation was quite natural. Moreover, King Nikola linked

⁴ Janković to Supreme Command, Cetinje, 12 May 1915, conf. no. 955, Vojni arhiv [Military Archives], Belgrade, reg. III, b. 91, fasc. 4.

the territorial expansion of his country with the future of his dynasty and the survival of an independent Montenegro. His premise was that Europe's consent to Montenegro's territorial expansion would in fact mean an expression of confidence in the Petrović-Njegoš dynasty. At the same time, it would considerably contribute to easier acceptance of the return of the discredited dynasty on the part of Montenegrin people.⁵

Just as he was mistaken in counting on Russia, King Nikola was under illusion as to Italy's willingness to support his intentions. From the early days of the war Italian diplomacy was determined in its opposition to Montenegrin designs in respect of northern Albania, and Scutari in particular. When King Nikola's troops entered Scutari in June 1915 Italy suspended any co-operation with Montenegro, requested the blockade of the Montenegrin coast and the cancellation of any sort of assistance to that country (financial, material).⁶ The Italian government did not approve of King's other intentions either. As early as March 1915 the Italian foreign minister, Sidney Sonnino, informed the Ambassador in London, Marquis Guglielmo Imperiali, that Serbia should have Dubrovnik and Medua as well as Kotor and Bar "if she one day, which seems highly likely, unifies with Montenegro". A few days later, Sonnino supplemented this telegram adding that Serbia would receive Bosnia, whereas the hinterland — he probably referred to Herzegovina — would be granted to both Montenegro and Serbia which, he was convinced, would soon unify.⁷ Following the entry of Montenegrin troops into Scutari, Sonnino took a much more determined stance. He drew the attention of the Italian Ambassadors in the Allied capitals that the coast from Pelješac to the Drim was reserved — he did not say for which country — and the Montenegrin demands pertaining to it would not be considered before peace terms were discussed.⁸ Sonnino maintained this attitude until the end of the war.

⁵ Andrija Radović also supported such attitude at the time when he was the prime minister of the government-in-exile. In a memorandum sent to King Nikola on 19 August 1916 he professed that the territorial expansion of Montenegro was a precondition for its restoration, even in case a Yugoslav state came into being. "In the most favourable circumstances, Montenegro will encompass Herzegovina up to the Neretva river, and with Dubrovnik, Bay of Cattaro and Skadar [Shkodra] there will be a state with about a million inhabitants". V. G. Popovitch, *Censuré ou M. André Radovitch* (Paris 1917), 77.

⁶ S. Ratković, "Sukob Italije i Crne Gore oko Skadra 1915. godine", *Istorijski zapisi* XXXI/1-2 (1974), 95, 122.

⁷ Sonnino to Imperiali, Rome, 14 March 1915, Gab. Speciale, no. 101; Sonnino to Imperiali, Carloti and Tittoni, Rome, 21 March 1915, Gab. Speciale, no. 125, Sidney Sonnino Papers on microfilm, reel 31.

⁸ Sonnino to Ambassadors, Rome, 13 August 1915, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* [hereafter DDI], ser. V, vol. IV, 360.

In order to demonstrate his intention not to give up territorial expansion, King Nikola approved the execution of a long-prepared incursion into northern Albania and the capture of Scutari. At the end of June 1915 Montenegrin troops under the command of General Vešović entered Scutari despite numerous admonitions of the Allied governments. This action brought about further troubles and difficulties for the already discredited and isolated King Nikola. At the initiative of Italian diplomacy, the Allied governments handed a note to Cetinje on 10 July expressing their disagreement with the occupation of Scutari, refusing to recognise it and welcoming the decision of the Montenegrin government to comply with the final solution of Great Powers after the war. In the following months, there were rumours to the effect that the Montenegrin action had been taken in collusion with Austria-Hungary.⁹ King Nikola was willing to agree to Great Powers arbitration because he believed it to be a way of keeping the issue of Montenegro's territorial expansion on the agenda in future.

In early 1916, having found themselves in exile in Italy following the capitulation of Montenegro, King Nikola and Lazar Mijušković, the prime minister, continued their work with a view to securing territorial concessions after the war. That was indeed a rather unusual situation: having disbanded his army, consented to capitulation and left the country, the King requested the Allies to support Montenegrin territorial demands. The scene was almost grotesque and demonstrated the extent to which King Nikola did not grasp the situation he found himself in and how much he alienated the Allied governments with his actions. Naturally, he first turned to the Russian government for support. This was another mistake as Russian diplomacy did not approve of the Montenegrin court's policy and it increasingly left it to other Great Powers to deal with it. In mid-March 1916, King Nikola expressed his concerns for the future of Montenegro to the Russian minister at his court. He laid down the following conditions for its survival as an independent state: a) assurance of its independence; and b) the necessity of its territorial expansion. The Russian minister replied that the matter could not be discussed at the moment and that King Nikola should work towards rapprochement and co-operation with Serbia.¹⁰

On the same day (19 March), Mijušković prepared a memorandum, at the express request of King Nikola, which he handed to the Russian minister Islavin. This document detailed all the territorial demands of the Montenegrin sovereign and pointed out that the guarantee of territorial and political integrity of Montenegro on the part of Great Powers was a precondition for the preservation of its independence.

⁹ Ratković, "Sukob Italije i Crne Gore", 114–116.

¹⁰ Vujović, *Ujedinjenje*, 157.

As for territorial extension, King's maximal demands were as follows: the border would run ten kilometres south of the mouth of the Drim into the Adriatic Sea, along the watershed of the left bank of the Drim up to the confluence of the Black and the White Drim where the border between Serbia and Montenegro would be rectified in favour of the latter country in the Prijepolje region; from there it would run along the Lim and the Drina northwards to Rogatica and then to the west so as to attach Rogatica, Sarajevo and the surrounding area to Montenegro; the border would then run below Livno and descend to the sea, leaving the entire course and mouth of the Neretva to Montenegro. The entire bank of the the Neretva up to the Medua Bay would belong to Montenegro.¹¹

King Nikola's demands were unrealistic and unacceptable to any Great Power, or Serbia. Italy, in particular, refused to discuss the coastal region and Montenegrin territorial demands in general. Serbia and Russia followed suit. It was no wonder then that the Allies did not respond to the Montenegrin memorandum, which made King Nikola and Mijušković anxious. Their fear forced them into further mistakes.

Since the Russians were not forthcoming, King Nikola turned to the Italians. At the end of August 1916, he paid a visit to the Italian ambassador in Paris, Tomasso Tittoni. In the course of their second conversation he told the ambassador about his intention to visit the Italian royal couple in the Racconigi castle. He assured Tittoni he had not conducted negotiations with the Serbian government even though there was much talk to that effect, and also professed that he would leave to Great Powers to decide on territorial acquisitions of Montenegro and Serbia and, once such decisions were translated into a written document, he would work towards its fulfilment. "He handed me a memorandum in which he proclaimed his aspirations," Tittoni wrote to Rome, adding that he would send it by courier. The memorandum has not been found and its content is not known although it is safe to assume that it was similar, if not identical, to the text given to Islavin. Finally, Nikola gave assurances to Tittoni that Italy had her own reasons to work towards the restoration of Montenegro and asked him to relay their conversation to Sonnino. King Nikola also mentioned that "his General has raised a rebellion against Austria-Hungary, liberated certain counties and captured some arms". The King intended to return to Montenegro and his people and to fight along with them — he believed that Italy should help the rebels.¹² He considered Italy the only possible ally on

¹¹ Ibid. 158.

¹² Tittoni to Sonnino, Paris, 30 August 1916, Gab. 180, Sonnino Papers, reel 11.

account of her policy towards Yugoslav unification. However, he could not count much on Italian support either then or later.¹³

For quite some time King Nikola did not broach the territorial issue or send memoranda to Allied ministers and ambassadors. It was not before September 1917 that he prepared a new and lengthy memorandum for the Allied governments in which he laid out Montenegro's territorial pretensions. The reason behind this renewed activity was obvious: in July 1917 the Corfu conference between the Serbian government and the Yugoslav exiled politicians from Austria-Hungary took place and accepted the programme of Yugoslav unification; prior to that, in the spring of 1917, the Montenegrin Committee for National Unification had been formed which soon developed a lively activity against King Nikola and his policy. That was a sign for alarm and a stimulus to address other Great Powers as well. On 27 September 1917, King Nikola handed to George Graham, British Chargé d'Affairs at the Montenegrin court, a lengthy memorandum presenting his requests and expectations. He told Graham that he had drawn up the memorandum himself, of which he was very proud, and asked him to forward it to London. In an extensive document written in French the King presented the history of his country and Serbian people from the times of the Ottoman Sultan Murad I, the struggle against the invader and the sacrifices endured by Montenegro; he wrote of a high sense of duty possessed of Montenegrins, their devotion to progress and civilisation, and he remarked that Cetinje had had a printing press before Rome, and after London got one, in which books were printed both in Cyrillic and Latin letters. "A democrat in heart, the Montenegrin loves the fatherly authority of the old and famous [Petrović-Njegoš] dynasty which steers his destiny even today," the King wrote. Then he looked back at Napoleon I's wars, the conquest of his armies in Bay of Cattaro which had led to the separation "between the hard-working peasant and the seaman who cannot resign himself to being separated from a Montenegrin". He reminded that Montenegro had not received in the Balkan Wars what was due to it — Scutari, although it had lost 6,000 men in the fighting for that town. He ascribed the responsibility for that to Austria-Hungary. Then he referred to the assistance provided by Montenegro to the Allied countries during the war; he also reminded of the fact that the Allies had not provided the expected help to the Montenegrin army and people, which resulted in immense casualties, devastation and suffering.

¹³ In March 1917, when the need for an Italian protectorate in Albania was considered, Sonnino agreed "to make some concessions in the Shkodra region" to Montenegro. Sonnino to Morone, Rome, 18 March 1917, DDI, ser. V, vol. VII, 385–386.

All this was but a prelude in what King Nikola wanted to request. He raised the question if such casualties were not deserving of the Allied favour and support, in particular territorial compensations and reparations. In order to heal its wounds, economically recover and secure its future, King Nikola stressed, Montenegro had to rectify its borders. At the expense of Albania he demanded Scutari and Medua, important on account of trade and supply lines; in the north, he asked for part of Bosnia, up to Mt Romanija, for which Montenegrins shed their blood in the war; Herzegovina with Mostar, a region linked since ancient times with Montenegro through the common struggle against the Turks; the Neretva was envisaged as the northwest border of Montenegro which would encompass Dubrovnik, a splendid cultural centre; the entire coast from the mouth of the Neretva to that of the Drim, Bay of Cattaro included, should also belong to Montenegro; in the east, in the direction of Serbia, Montenegro had no territorial pretensions since “a people of the same blood and language connected to us with brotherly love” lived there. Finally, King Nikola pointed out that the Montenegrins counted on the Allied wisdom and generosity to the smallest ally and expressed his conviction that such an attitude would secure peace in the Balkans.¹⁴

King Nikola’s programme was very precise and more ambitious than the previous ones. In comparison with the earlier documents and his statements, there was a change in the thrust and nature of arguments. Above all, humanitarian and civilisational reasons were underlined rather than political — the sacrifices for the Allied cause, economic restoration, progress, better future. There was a considerable difference in relation to the previous memoranda in respect of the size of the territory and regions requested by King Nikola. The memorandum of March 1916 was abandoned. For example, that memorandum called for rectification of the Serbian border, whereas the latest one did not raise that question. As far as the coast was concerned, the pretensions remained as before with a minor adjustment — the border proposed in 1916 had been moved ten kilometres south of the mouth of the Drim; also, the requests concerning Herzegovina took their final shape. On the whole, King’s memorandum presented his maximal territorial demands.

That was how King’s programme was understood in the British Foreign Office. Harold Nicolson of the Political Department thought the memorandum had completely formulated Montenegrin territorial pretensions, but believed these should be neither discussed nor decided upon. He

¹⁴ Graham to Balfour, Paris, 27 September 1917, no. 10, with the attached Memorandum of King Nikola, no date, Foreign Office Records 371, file 189486–189486, The National Archives, London [hereafter FO 371].

suggested that King Nikola simply be told that his requests would be considered. George Clerk, a Political Department official, noted that the King's demands, if accepted, would mean the doubling of Montenegro's size. "They are, of course, completely unacceptable, mostly because of the existing various treaties and commitments." He pointed out that the memorandum was "typical of its royal author" and that he should be simply thanked. Anything else, even an assurance that his requests would be taken into consideration, had better be avoided. His suggestion was accepted and on 8 October Graham was instructed to thank King Nikola for his document, which he did.

A few weeks later the same memorandum was handed to the Italian ambassador in Paris, Marquis Salvago-Ragi. Salvago-Ragi reported to Sonnino that King Nikola had given him a memorandum prepared for the peace conference which had been nicely received in London, and asked permission to forward the memorandum to Rome.¹⁵ That was the end of this matter: King Nikola never received any assurance or promise regarding a favourable consideration of his demands.

In early 1918, certain important events took place forcing King Nikola to voice his views. The October Revolution, the Italian defeat at the Battle of Kobarid and the subsequent US declaration of war upon Austria-Hungary had considerable impact on the Balkan developments, Montenegro included. To encourage Italian resistance, on one hand, and convince Austria-Hungary's ruling circles that their country could be saved through deflection from Germany, on the other, British prime minister, David Lloyd George, and American president, Woodrow Wilson, gave speeches together. Both of them expounded their conviction that Austria-Hungary should be preserved, whereas Serbia and Montenegro should be restored and indemnified. That meant that neither country could expect territorial enlargement. As Montenegro was supposed to be granted nearly all territories at the expense of Austria-Hungary, the suggestions of the Allied leaders denoted their disagreement with the King's demands. Moreover, although it did not say it publically, the British War Cabinet made a decision that the best solution of the Montenegrin question would be the annexation of Montenegro to Serbia.¹⁶

During these days King Nikola was at his residence in Pau, in the south of France. His prime minister, Evgenije Popović, visited him there

¹⁵ Salvago-Ragi to Sonnino, Paris, 17 October 1917, DDI, ser. V, vol. IX, 167–168. Sonnino replied that the minister Romano Avezana should thank King Nikola for his memorandum which he had read with "interest". Sonnino to Avezana, Rome, 18 October 1917, Gab. 1699/14, Sonnino Papers, reel 41.

¹⁶ Dragoljub Živojinović, "Velika Britanija i problem Crne Gore 1914–1918. Godine", *Balcanica VIII* (1977), 513.

and they discussed the Allied leaders' programmes. According to the Italian minister Avezzana, the King was "very satisfied with the recent speeches of the English prime minister and president Wilson which included the restoration of Montenegro among the chief war aims". King Nikola was worried because of France, the statesmen of which failed to mention Montenegro and its future in their public statements. He considered that failure deliberate, in fact evidence that France was still working to suffocate Montenegro and attach it to Serbia.¹⁷ A month later, in February 1918, King Nikola met in Paris with the Italian prime minister, Vittorio Orlando, and foreign minister Sonnino. They assured him that the Italian government would make every effort to restore Montenegro after the war. The King also tried to secure France's support and, to that end, visited the prime minister, Georges Clemenceau. He complained to Clemenceau about the manner in which he, his family and government had been treated; he objected to his being depicted as a traitor and treated as an enemy, to the cancellation of his subvention, to the prevention of a Montenegrin regiment from being formed, and to suggesting the annexation of Montenegro to Serbia. According to the King, Clemenceau was very friendly towards him personally and to Montenegro, and he was willing to renew the subvention and support the formation of a Montenegrin regiment. He also stated to have been unfamiliar with the plans for the annexation of Montenegro to Serbia, but he promised to make enquires about that matter.¹⁸

After all these conversations the situation was much clearer and the attitude of Allies towards Montenegro was determined. Great Britain, the USA and Italy were inclined to the preservation of Montenegro as an independent state while France's stance was indefinite. No Great Power, however, expressed its views on the territorial demands and expectations of the Montenegrin sovereign. He could have been satisfied with such assurances even though some of them were insincere (Britain and France) while others were motivated by own interests (Italy). King Nikola realised what was the value of such assurances as well as the meaning of the complete silence in respect of his territorial requests. That seemed ominous to him. He confided his thoughts and mood to Avezzana in mid-April 1918. The Italian minister found him "worried and reserved", which he put down to the uncertain situation and the hesitation of Allies to voice their views on Montenegro's future. On that occasion, the King told Avezzana that he decided to pay a visit to Queen Jelena and discuss his future actions with her. The minister

¹⁷ Avezzana to Sonnino, Paris, 12 January 1918, Gab. 23/16, Montenegro 1915-1918, box 158, The Archives of Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Rome.

¹⁸ Avezzana to Sonnino, Paris, 7 February 1918, Gab. 23/16, *ibid.*

refrained from giving any advice to the King, but he was convinced that there were serious reasons for the impending visit.¹⁹

Serbian diplomacy was also aware of this visit. The minister in London, Jovan Jovanović, wrote to Regent Alexander that King Nikola was in Rome. He assured the Regent that Italy would side with Montenegro against the unification and assist King Nikola to form a Montenegrin regiment which would be sent to Albania to be as close as possible to Montenegro. Jovanović did not see a fortunate future for the old King for whom he claimed to have come into conflict with his own people. The minister believed that Montenegro's fate had been decided a long time ago. "Since 1904 the old skilful King has lost the rudder of his ship which he 'skilfully' steered from 1860 onwards," he wrote. "Since then his ship has drifted without a rudder, without a mast. It has not been entirely wracked as yet, but the end is near..."²⁰ Jovanović's metaphoric prophecy eventually proved accurate.

At the beginning of May 1918, the King received and visited the Allied ambassadors. On 5 May, he had a conversation with the American ambassador, Thomas Page, and expressed the appreciation of Montenegrin people for president Wilson and his ideas; he hoped that the USA would protect the rights of small nations, Montenegro included. Finally, he delivered a lengthy memorandum on the territorial demands of Montenegro and requested that it be forwarded to president Wilson.²¹ Two days later, on 8 May, the British ambassador, Rennell Rodd, visited King Nikola at his residence. Their conversation was much more open than that with Page. The King complained about his unfortunate fate, uncertain future, Serbia's attitude; he tried to convince Rodd that the Montenegrins did not want unification with Serbia, that France was under Serbia's influence and that he therefore trusted in Great Britain alone. He handed him a memorandum for which he claimed to have been prepared for the peace conference, he requested that it remain confidential and be forwarded to the Foreign Of-

¹⁹ Avezzana to Sonnino, Pau, 17 and 23 April 1918, Gab. 20, 22, Sonnino Papers, reel 19. Nikola journeyed with his daughter Vjera.

²⁰ Jovanović to Regent Alexander, London, 27 April 1918, private, Court's office, various years, Arhiv Srbije [Archives of Serbia], Belgrade.

²¹ Page to Lansing, Rome, 6 May 1918, State Department Records, series 763, 72119/1644, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington. The memorandum was immediately forwarded to President Wilson. In his conversation with Page, King Nikola spoke of other matters as well — relations with the Italian royal family, the hopes in the USA, the French attitude, the appointment of a minister in Washington. Page to Lansing, 7 May 1918, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. The Lansing Papers 1914–1918*, I–II (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939–1940), vol. II, 122–124.

fice.²² A few days later, on 12 May, the King handed a memorandum to the Italian minister at the Montenegrin court, Marquis Paolo Montagliari.

Describing the content of the memorandum, ambassador Rodd pointed out that King Nikola was “a master of that kind of documents”. His demands were identical to those he had made in September. Indeed, the only new feature concerned a few paragraphs which depicted the wars waged by Montenegrins in Herzegovina (1876) and the sufferings endured by Montenegro at the time of Ottoman incursions (1852 and 1862). This suggests that King Nikola did not give up his demands, but he refrained from making new ones. He remained convinced that the territorial extensions he envisaged were a *sine qua non* of Montenegro’s future.

The reaction of American and Italian diplomacy is not known. The Foreign Office received the King’s memorandum with resignation rather than outright rejection. Nicolson noted that the King had mentioned the struggle for Scutari in order to use it in his own defence. As for Dubrovnik, Nicolson opined that this town had to belong to Serbia, even if Montenegro was restored. His resignation was apparent in a remark that “the question of Montenegro would be one of the most difficult for the peace conference, because little can be done without a plebiscite which would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out”. Allen Leeper, an expert for territorial settlement, was hopeful that the recently held conference of the oppressed nationalities of Austria-Hungary and the Italo-Yugoslav agreement (Torre-Trumbić) would diminish the influence of King Nikola in Rome. His words confirmed the widely-spread belief that Italy was a sole protector of Montenegro and its ruler — and thus the main factor in the solution of this question.

In the following months there was no indication of King Nikola’s new initiatives with regard to Montenegro’s territorial demands. His attention was increasingly drawn to the question of the unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. He considered it essential for the future of his dynasty. Realising that he was not able to prevent the unification as the Allied governments supported it, the King endeavoured to discredit the foundations (centralism) on which it was supposed to be executed. He condemned Dr. Ante Trumbić, the president of the Yugoslav committee, for his co-operation with the Serbian government and claimed that he had no support in

²² Rodd to Balfour, Rome, 9 May 1918, conf. 63 with the attached undated memorandum in French, FO 371, file 85253/85253, TNA. The text of the memorandum can also be found in Montenegro 1915–1918, box 158, Archives of Italian Foreign Ministry, Rome.

the country and spoke for no one. He advocated the creation of a federal state in which all constituent provinces would have autonomous status.²³

When the peace conference invited the delegation of Montenegro in early March 1919 to put forward and explain its requests, the prime minister, Jovan Plamenac, revised the objectives formulated in the King's memoranda. Nevertheless, their essence remained the same even if their justification was considerably different from that advanced by King Nikola. Plamenac requested Herzegovina, Bay of Cattaro and Scutari with the surrounding area. His memorandum did not mention Medua, Dubrovnik, the Neretva valley, the Adriatic coast from the mouth of the Neretva to that of the Drim or the Serbian border.²⁴ Apparently, this was a departure from the King's maximal demands, and it provided the Montenegrin delegation with room for manoeuvre to expand or reduce its requests depending on the situation. It remains a mystery why King Nikola agreed to such curbing of his agenda. He must have accepted it at the request of Plamenac.

King Nikola gradually formulated the territorial demands of Montenegro. Initially, these were constrained and indefinite, often unclear and contradictory. Some regions and towns were always included in his combinations: Bay of Cattaro and Kotor, Skadar, Dubrovnik. Mostar, Sarajevo and Medua were added later. At first, the request for rectification of the Serbian border was advanced and later that claim was abandoned.

It should be noted that King Nikola put forward his maximal demands at the least favourable moment for him and Montenegro, i.e. while he was in exile. No doubt he misjudged his abilities and influence as well as the Allies' frame of mind. He realised it was worth addressing some governments (Italian and British) and not others (French). He quickly came to the conclusion that Russian support could not be expected, whereas he placed great hopes in the USA and its president. Given the small number of his capable officials, it is difficult to ascertain if he conferred with someone and, if he did, with whom. He obviously wrote his memoranda himself, as evidenced by their flamboyant style and phrases, historical references and emphasis on war.

He presented himself as an enlightened, progressive ruler who was hampered in his efforts to forge a better future for Montenegro by its poverty, backwardness, small size and the small number of his subjects. These

²³ Montagliari to Sonnino, Paris, 31 August and 3 September 1918, no. 5–6, Montenegro 1915–1918, box 158, *ibid*.

²⁴ Montenegro before Peace Conference, Memorandum of 5 March 1919 which the government of the Kingdom of Montenegro submitted to the Paris Conference (Paris 1919), 27–37; Dragoljub Živojinović, "Pitanje Crne Gore i mirovna konferencija 1919. godine", *Istorija XX veka XIV-XV* (1982), 42–43.

were the arguments he used in order to support his demands which seemed, and with good reason, excessive and unrealistic to most people. Moreover, his requests were impossible to achieve also on account of the fact that Great Powers took a dim view of his return to Montenegro.

Being an experienced statesman, King Nikola believed that the fate of Montenegro and his dynasty was in his own hands. He was the only person who could speak on behalf of both with the requisite authority. However, the Allied diplomats and statesmen found him a cunning, shifty, insincere autocrat and distrusted him. He lost their confidence through his actions and policy for which he was suspected of collaboration with Austria-Hungary and the betrayal of the Allies. This was his stigma and he could not shake it off until the end of the war.

Despite the King's great hopes, his efforts to win over the Allies for his programme of territorial expansion failed dismally. That was inevitable and the King could hardly be responsible on this score. He spared no effort, but the circumstances and resistance to his policy were such as to make it impossible to any person to achieve more than he did. He persistently struggled for what he believed in and realised in the end that the struggle was useless.

*UDC 929.73 i Nikola I Petrović
327.2(497.16:497.11) 1914/1920*

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