

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC: SERBS AND ETHNIC CROSSOVER IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

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Diasporas are often imagined as impermeable communities. Yet the boundaries of the Serbian diaspora in the United States were surprisingly porous to certain outsiders, such as Ruth Mitchell, who routinely dressed as a Chetnik to address Serbian immigrants. Mitchell's act of ethnic crossover, this paper argues, fits into a broader pattern of ethnic outsiders joining Serbian organizations in the United States. Four case studies besides Ruth Mitchell are discussed: Eleanor Calhoun, Johann Blose, Charles DeHarrack, and Frank Melford. Diplomats acted as gatekeepers to these Serbophiles, limiting access to emigrant social and political networks as they saw fit—but only rarely was the Serbophiles' ethnic background a factor.

KEYWORDS: Serbian Diaspora, Serbophilia, United States, Yugoslavia, Ruth Mitchell

IZVLEČEK

Odperto za javnost: Srbi in etnični prehod v Združenih državah Amerike

Diaspore si pogosto predstavljamo kot neprodušno zaprte skupnosti. Vendar pa so bile meje srbske diaspore v Združenih državah Amerike za nekatere tujce presenetljivo prepustne – takšna je bila Ruth Mitchell, ki se je redno oblačila v četniška oblačila in tako nagovarjala srbske priseljence. Prispevek podaja tezo, da to dejanje etničnega prehoda spada v širši vzorec etničnih tujcev, ki so se pridruževali srbskim organizacijam v ZDA. Poleg Ruth Mitchell članek obravnava še štiri druge študije primera: Eleanor Calhoun, Johann Blose, Charles DeHarrack in Frank Melford. Diplomati so pri tem imeli vlogo paznikov teh srbofilov in so po svoji volji omejevali dostop do družbenih in političnih omrežij priseljencev – pri čemer pa je na to le redko vplivala etnična pripadnost teh srbofilov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: srbska diaspora, srbofilija, ZDA, Jugoslavija, Ruth Mitchell

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INTRODUCTION

On June 28, 1943, Ruth Mitchell strode out in front of a crowd of Serbian Americans in Chicago. Brandishing a curved dagger and donning an outfit worn by the Chetniks, Serbian guerrillas in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia, Mitchell cut a strange figure (Figure 1). Her speech, calling for the creation of a “pure” Serbian ethnostate, added to the incongruity (Vukmirović, 1943). To her most fervent supporters, she was “our Serbian knightly Chetnik Ruth Mitchell” and honorary president of the Serbian National Defense, a political club for Serbian immigrants (Fotić, 1943a; Marković, 1943). Even so, this Serbian nationalist was also a quintessential old-stock American—Scottish ancestry, senator father, English husband, Ivy League education, and an American general as a brother. Yet the most striking thing about Mitchell is not that she was unique, but that she was not—during the first half of the twentieth century, four other Americans participated in Serbian-American cultural and political life. In this article, I examine these five cases, paying particular attention to how the state assisted or hindered the activities of these Serbophiles.



Figure 1: Ruth Mitchell with dagger and speech, est. 1943. Source: *The Lady Guerilla Comes Home to the Marital Wars* (1944). *American Weekly*, 2. 1. 1944.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading about Ruth Mitchell, contemporary Americans might be reminded of Rachel Dolezal, the most famous (or infamous) of a series of “racial imposters” in the United States. Both Mitchell and Dolezal were active members of an ethnic organization—in Dolezal’s case, the NAACP—identifying strongly with the ethnic group whose cause they worked to advance. There are important distinctions between the two—Mitchell did not conceal her ethnic background, whereas Dolezal did. Nonetheless, Dolezal is a useful theoretical springboard for the phenomenon she represents, which Rogers Brubaker (2016a) terms “transracialism” or “transethnicity.” Although the study of this phenomenon is still embryonic, most scholars agree that “transracialism” or “transethnicity” has become increasingly common since the 1980s. David Roediger (2002), for instance, identified a trend toward “racial crossover,” citing the growing popularity of yoga, east-Asian martial arts, Buddhism, and hip-hop among white Americans.

Similarly, Kanchan Chandra (2012: 2) has observed that the percent of Americans claiming Native-American ancestry grew by over eighty percent in 1980 and an additional thirty percent in 1990. In turn, Philip Deloria (1998: 170–173) connects the fad of faux-Native American new-age spirituality among whites with the 1980s-era multiculturalism and the blurring of ethnic boundaries. Mary Waters (1990: 7–10), meanwhile, describes how the US census added a question about ancestry in 1980, pleasing whites seeking to add “spice to an otherwise bland postindustrial existence.” The descendants of Slavic, Italian, and Irish immigrants have taken a renewed interest in the language and culture of their forebears, even if this is just an ancestral dish, holiday, phrase, or family story.

However, the most detailed deconstruction of this phenomenon has come from Rogers Brubaker (2016b: 7–8, 10–11, 72, 141–142), who argues that we live in an “Age of Unsettled Identities.” The power of the American government to enforce racial and ethnic distinctions, he contends, has been eroded over the past several decades by the multiracial movement, intermarriage, and genetic testing. Ancestry, Brubaker argues, is increasingly a choice. Moreover, the Butlerian turn toward the performative and fluid understanding of gender has reinforced the elective treatment of race. Brubaker concludes that these trends culminate in the logic of transgenderism being applied to racial and ethnic identity, albeit not without considerable controversy, as Dolezal’s case illustrates.

Much of this literature focuses on the movement between races rather than ethnicities. Indeed, in 2021 there is a crucial distinction between a white American posturing as a Serb and a white American adopting an African American persona. Nonetheless, as Matthew Jacobson (1999: 6) shows, the boundary between race and ethnicity was blurrier one hundred years ago. In popular discourse, Slavs, Jews, Italians, etc. really *were* different races, even if the US naturalization law categorized these groups as “white.” In fact, “Serbo-Croatians” were seen as the most racially

distinct. When “white Americans” were polled in 1926 to rank their aversion to various groups, “Serbo-Croatians” were the least liked of the white ethnics (i.e., Poles, Greeks, etc.), just above African Americans, Filipinos, and Japanese. On the other hand, “whiteness,” despite its ostensible biological underpinnings, was a porous category to which Balkan migrants could aspire, so long as they learned English, dressed as Americans did, and passed through the naturalization process (Barrett, 2002: 141–145). Thus, by the standards and methods of her time, Ruth Mitchell really did move between racial categories—by learning a new language and adopting a new mode of dress.

As such, theoretical insights from the literature on the trans-ethnic and trans-racial phenomenon seem germane. Even so, the cases of Ruth Mitchell and those like her suggest that Brubaker’s “Age of Unsettled Identities” framework is perhaps too restrictive. Instead, this piece will expand on a separate question that Brubaker poses: “who controls—and patrols—the boundaries of categories?” For Brubaker, part of the answer is the American state (2016b: 5–8). Indeed, other scholars, such as James Barrett (2002: 145) and Daniel Sharfstein (2003), have identified how American race laws, racialized litigation, and immigration restrictions, such as the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, shaped the discursive frameworks in which race and ethnicity were constituted. One could also point to Benedict Anderson’s (Anderson, 2006: 163–185) brief but insightful discussion of colonial-era censuses and maps in Southeast Asia, which created the classificatory frameworks that still structure the ways post-colonial states imagine ethnic divisions. States clearly shape the cognition of ethnic categories, and by extension, the possibilities for inter-ethnic movement.

But the US state did not have a monopoly on structuring ethnicity in the United States. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, several states—Italy, most notably, but also Serbia, and later, Yugoslavia—discovered that a loyal and patriotic diaspora could advance national goals (Brunnbauer, 2016; Choate, 2008; Gabaccia, 2000). These goals varied. Through its well-connected honorary consul, the émigré scientist Mihajlo Pupin, Serbia benefitted from its diaspora lobby—which ultimately helped it acquire the Banat after WWI (Brunnbauer, 2016: 169, 225; Djikanović, 2016: 11). Yugoslavia, meanwhile, saw creating a patriotic diaspora as one front in a transnational campaign to make Yugoslavs out of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes—a policy inspired by a similar effort, *mutatis mutandis*, in Italy (Emigration Commissariat, 1925; Gabaccia, 2000: 142). Yugoslavia relied more on professional diplomats than emigrant volunteers than Serbia, although partnerships with emigrant civil society organizations remained important. This different approach did not deny emigrants agency—independent powerbrokers, like John Palandech in Chicago, alternately aided and frustrated Yugoslav diplomats throughout this period (Fischer-Nebmaier, 2019). Even so, much as Pupin did, Yugoslav diplomats networked extensively with self-help societies, choral groups, churches, and newspapers—especially Serbian ones (Grčić & Gnjato, 2004; Larson, 2020: 72–171, 243–300).

As such, the state figures prominently in all five of our cases of ethnic crossover: Eleanor Calhoun, Johann Blose, Charles DeHarrack, Frank Melford, and Ruth Mitchell. These cases are grouped chronologically and thematically. We will first explore what drew each person to Serbian culture, followed by their encounter with state agents. Ethnic crossover, a term I borrow from Roediger (2002), is based on *doing*—identifying with Serbian culture and taking part in organizations devoted to it—rather than *being*. Nobody discussed here claimed to be Serbian, à la Dolezal, even if some saw Serbs as kindred spirits. Crossover, as it is used here, is also a matter of degree rather than kind. Some of our cases *did* more than others, Mitchell being an extreme example. In all these cases, however, diplomats were determined to “patrol the boundaries” of Serbian-American civil society. Admittedly, the actions and explanations of consuls for their decisions were not guided by a consistent policy. Even so, it is surprising how rarely a non-Serbian background was considered an *ipso facto* dealbreaker. Serbian organizations were, as a result, largely “open to the public.”

FROM ACTRESS TO PRINCESS—THE STRANGE JOURNEY OF ELEANOR LAZAROVICH-HREBELIANOVICH

Our first case, Eleanor Calhoun (a Californian by birth), was an actress by profession (Princess Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, 1957). In early 1903, at a soirée in London, Eleanor Calhoun met a man calling himself Prince Stephan Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich. Despite his title, the “prince” had no relation to Serbia’s ruling dynasty, the house of Obrenović. This status was fortunate for him since the Obrenovići would be massacred and overthrown by the house of Karađorđević just days before Eleanor and the prince’s wedding in June 1903. Although Calhoun asserts that the British press, outraged at the regicide, floated Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich as a replacement, regime change was not in the cards—in October, Prince Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich issued a statement denying any royal ambitions (Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, 1915: 313–323). The Karađorđevići, meanwhile, would remain in power until 1945, first as kings of Serbia, and, after 1918, Yugoslavia.

This setback notwithstanding, “Princess Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich,” as she began to call herself, became a vocal defender of Serbia’s claims to Macedonia, still owned by the Ottoman Empire in 1903. Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria all coveted Macedonia, and paramilitary violence between Bulgarian and Serbian squads/bands, called *čete* (the forerunners of Ruth Mitchell’s Chetniks), was endemic to Macedonia during the first decades of the twentieth century (Newman, 2013). For the princess, the upshot of this simmering conflict was that Serbia’s ethnic claim to Macedonia required continuous (verbal) defense.

Traveling around the Balkans with her husband, the princess increasingly identified with the Serbs (Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, 1915: 324–338). In her memoirs,

the princess—despite her initial prejudice against “the half-civilized inhabitants of a small district somewhere to the east”—describes how

the more I learned of these peoples, the more did their cause lay hold of my thoughts [...] I discovered that they were democratic [...] that their institutions took note of individual human dignity [...] I learned of their pure home ideals, of the nobility and devotion of their women, of their unaffected and natural religious conceptions, of their old ballads [...] of their courage, their undying natural faith [...] Finally I learned that they alone of all European nations never admitted slavery during the Middle Ages (Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, 1915: 316–318).

In 1910, having moved to New York, the princess and her husband co-authored a four-hundred-page omnibus history, in English, of the “Servian People” (Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich & Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, 1910). Despite its historical and ethnographic focus, this book also included a survey of unredeemed “Servian Lands:” Croatia, Bosnia, Dalmatia, Vojvodina, and Macedonia (Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich & Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, 1910: 142–176). This book thus dovetailed with the Serbian state’s irredentist agenda, especially after the Austrian annexation of Bosnia in 1908.

In 1912, however, Mihajlo Pupin, an honorary consul of Serbia in the United States, denounced the couple (Servian Princess Clashes with Pupin, 1912). Pupin was a prime example of the leverage diplomats could bring to bear, reigning as the grey eminence of the Serbian American community in the United States until his death in 1935. Pupin was well connected, serving as the president of several immigrant self-help societies before becoming honorary consul in 1911. After his appointment, Pupin leveraged these connections to support Serbia’s efforts in the Balkan Wars (Grčić & Gnjato, 2004; Pavlović, 1999). In this regard, Pupin and the princess were in alignment. Yet Pupin had other considerations as well. The house of Lazarović-Hrebelianović was quite ancient compared to the Karadjordjević dynasty (although it was thought to have gone extinct in the fifteenth century). A claimant from that dynasty could potentially delegitimize Serbia’s government, even if he had little chance of taking power. Probably, for this reason, Pupin almost immediately denounced the prince as a “pretender to the Servian throne” (Servian Princess Clashes with Pupin, 1912). Following Pupin’s lead, various Serbian organizations distributed leaflets with attacks in a similar vein (Tesla, 1912).

Even so, the Princess and her husband found supporters in the Serbian American community, most notably Nikola Tesla. Responding to Pupin’s accusations, Tesla argued that while Prince Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich possibly *did* have royal blood (a telling framing), it ultimately did not matter, “for he has won a better claim to distinction through his labors and rare intelligence.” Acceptance was a matter of pragmatism. Tesla acknowledged, however, that his had become a minority view

(Tesla, 1912). Soon afterward, Princess Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich disengaged from Serbian émigré politics entirely (Princess Lazarovich-Hrebelianovich, 1957).

Three significant takeaways emerge from this instance of failed crossover. First, Eleanor Calhoun had no issue penetrating Serbian circles from 1903–1912. Serbian nationalists welcomed anyone advancing their political cause, even if they were not ethnic Serbs or authentic royals. Tesla, moreover, stated the latter point explicitly. Second, the person who curtailed Calhoun's engagement with Serbian affairs was an agent (honorary consul) of the Serbian state. Pupin was not interested in the sincerity of Calhoun's Serbophilia but in the authenticity of her husband's royal pedigree. Third, Serbian immigrants followed Pupin's lead in attacking Calhoun, disregarding Tesla, who was not an honorary consul.

AMERICAN CONDUCTORS AND SERBIAN CHOIRS

The twentieth century was a fertile field for ethnic crossover in music—especially in genres dominated by African-Americans. Besides Elvis, one could point to Mezz Mezzrow, a jazzman of Russian-Jewish provenance, and Johnny Otis, a mid-twentieth-century rhythm and blues musician of Greek extraction (Brubaker, 2016b: 88–89).

Johann M. Blose was cut from a similar cloth. Born in 1870 in rural Pennsylvania to German-American parents, Blose was a musical prodigy, possessing perfect pitch and an eidetic memory. Between 1885 and 1924, Blose taught music in and around Pittsburgh, a major destination for south-Slavic migrants (Yugoslavs in the United States, 1923). In 1924, Blose moved to Lebanon, Pennsylvania, and in 1928, established there the Binički Choir, a Serbian singing society (Godcharles, 1933: 459–460).

As the Binički Choir's director, Blose immersed himself in Serbian culture, collecting and arranging his favorite melodies and dances from approximately two-hundred religious and secular pieces. Claiming to be, perhaps truthfully, "the first and most famous exponent of Serbian music in America," over the next several years, Blose sought to "spread the Gospel of Serbian music," touring emigrant communities in Pittsburgh, New York City, Chicago, Akron, Detroit, and Gary, Indiana (Godcharles, 1933: 459–460).

In 1934, Blose and the Binički Choir caught the eye of the Yugoslav consul in New York, Radoje Janković. Janković, a Serb, praised Blose as "an excellent musician, composer, and director [...] to whom most of the success of this group can be attributed," even recommending that Blose receive the Order of St. Sava—a physical stamp of approval—"for his beautiful and self-sacrificing labor disseminating our songs and cultural propaganda in this country" (Janković, 1934). Folk choirs were, moreover, central to Yugoslavia's immigrant cultural outreach. Several were even subsidized (Emigration Commissariat, 1925: 22; Larson, 2020: 108–109, 258–259). This treatment of Blose suggests that Yugoslavia's enforcement of ethnic boundaries was pragmatic—Blose was talented and successful, the thinking went,

the preservation of Serbian consciousness among immigrants outweighed the Germanness of its proponent.

And yet, a contemporary of Blose, Charles DeHarrack, represents one of the few instances where Yugoslav diplomats took issue with the ethnic background of their American collaborators. Born in 1881 in Brest-Litovsk to Jewish parents, DeHarrack emigrated to the United States at the age of four, pursuing his musical education and then a career back in Europe. There, DeHarrack worked as the court pianist for King Peter I of Serbia—where, presumably, he was exposed to Serbian folk music (DeHarrack, 2021). After returning to the United States, DeHarrack founded a Serbian singing society in Cleveland.

DeHarrack, perhaps even more than Blose, understood the importance of a consular endorsement, inviting the Yugoslav vice-consul Cerrezin, a Croat, to the tenth-anniversary celebration of his singing society in 1939. But Cerrezin was suspicious, writing: “some of the features of this celebration I cannot help but feel are out of place. Mr. DeHarrack is the director of a Serbian Singing Society and *is a Russian (I believe a Jew)* [emphasis mine]” (Cerrezin, 1939a). In a subsequent letter, the consul called the episode “peculiar,” noting that “two thirds of [the guests] are of Jewish extraction,” and insinuated that DeHarrack’s true motive was money from ticket sales. The combination of these factors, he argued, “places us in an unfavorable light, meaning, of course, the Yugoslav cause (Cerrezin, 1939b).” Cerrezin doubtless had an eye on the international context: after 1938, Nazi Germany, famously hostile to Jews, shared a border with Yugoslavia. Antagonizing them was to be avoided.

Yet DeHarrack’s case also shows that Yugoslav diplomats were not a monolithic group—Cerrezin would be overruled by his superior, minister Konstantin Fотиć. Why Fотиć did so is unclear. In his reply to Cerrezin, Fотиć (1939) merely told Cerrezin to politely decline DeHarrack’s request for a radio interview—stating that “in the current circumstances I could not make statements of a political nature, which would be difficult to avoid.” “Current circumstances” was a capacious phrase—Fотиć may have been concerned that dropping DeHarrack might outrage American audiences, just as appearing on the radio at his behest might send another message. Or perhaps Fотиć (a Serb) wanted to rebuke Cerrezin (a Croat) since the two had clashed before—Cerrezin even threatened to resign in 1937, claiming that he was “not being treated fairly” by Fотиć (Cerrezin, 1937). Regardless, with the backing of Fотиć, DeHarrack’s choir would perform at the Cleveland celebration of Yugoslav Unity Day. Fотиć attended personally (Grđina et al., 1939). Ultimately, DeHarrack was the exception that proves the rule—though some Yugoslav diplomats may have been suspicious of these ethnic outsiders, DeHarrack’s diplomatic endorsement suggests that a foreign background was not disqualifying.

LOVE, PASSION, AND YUGOSLAV CINEMA

In 1932, one of the earliest sound films in Serbo-Croatian premiered in a cinema on the upper east side of Manhattan (Janković, 1933). Directed and co-written by Frank Melford, this film, titled *Ljubav i Strast* (Love and Passion), depicts a romance between a stenographer, Helen, and her boss, Richard. Both were played by South-Slavic actors. Complications ensue after Rachel discovers that Richard has bet five thousand dollars that he can seduce her, but in the end, the two reconcile and are married. The film was, judging by a review in the *New York Times*, workmanlike and “lively,” if “too melodramatic at times” (H. T. S., 1932).

This film presents an intriguing puzzle: how did a man named Frank Melford come to make a film called *Ljubav i Strast*? How is it that one of the first Serbo-Croatian talkies remains obscure, even though Yugoslav elites saw developing an indigenous film industry as integral to national prestige (Babović, 2015)?

The key to the first mystery is a romance: one between Frank Melford, an aspiring filmmaker, and his wife, Rakela Davidović, an actress who was born in Belgrade. Both were Jewish. Like Eleanor Calhoun, marriage was the gateway to Melford’s cultural crossover. On Rakela’s prompting, Melford organized a company, Yugoslav Pictures Inc., to produce films in Serbo-Croatian for the South-Slavic immigrants in the United States. Melford and Davidović also co-wrote the script for their debut offering, *Ljubav i Strast*, for which Davidović took the leading role as “Helen.” Other characters were played by small-time Serbian and Croatian actors in New York City (Janković, 1933). Although Melford was more of a Yugoslavophile than a Serbophile *per se*, the former did not preclude the latter. The boundary between “Serbian” and “Yugoslav” was especially blurred during Yugoslavia’s royal dictatorship (1929–1934), when Serbian, Croatian, and Slovene cultures were seen as elements to be synthesized into a broader Yugoslav culture (Troch, 2010).

Given this context, if *Ljubav i Strast* could catch the eye of the Yugoslav consul in New York, Yugoslav Pictures could obtain funding, filming, and distribution rights in Yugoslavia (Janković, 1932). During the 1930s, Yugoslav diplomats in the United States screened silent films to migrants to promote patriotism. The subject matter for these films skewed Serbian: footage of Serbian soldiers in World War I, the Serbian King, or religious buildings (Pavlović, 1928). A sound film like *Ljubav i Strast* would have been a definite upgrade.

Consul Janković was initially receptive. Janković soured on the proposal, however, after learning that Melford and company had fabricated employment histories at MGM, Fox, and Paramount to pad their resumes. Melford is an interesting counterpoint to DeHarrack since anti-Semitism also played a role—in his report, Janković observed that everyone employed by Yugoslav Pictures was Jewish and had refused his demand that “they take some Yugoslav into the management.” Their main objective, Janković argued, was “to earn money.” Janković also disliked the film,

calling it “a banal patchwork” that was unlikely to be financially successful. Janković declined to recommend *Ljubavi Strast* to the foreign ministry (Janković, 1933).

Thus ended Yugoslav Pictures. Frank Melford never made another Serbo-Croatian film (IMDB, 2021a). Rakela Davidović fared worse, dropping out of the acting scene entirely after 1938 (IMDB, 2021b). Several additional lessons can be drawn from this episode. Interethnic boundaries in New York were fluid, especially due to intermarriage, and apparently, few people thought it odd that non-Slavs would produce a movie in Serbo-Croatian. Success in this endeavor hinged on the Yugoslav consul, who restricted access to resources and immigrant networks. Melford is a necessary caveat to the case of DeHarrack, showing that anti-Semitism could influence the decisions of Yugoslav diplomats—Yugoslav policy toward Serbophiles was not wholly coherent. Even so, it is worth noting that Janković did not treat Melford’s Jewish origin as an immediate disqualifier. If Melford had acceded to Janković’s request to hire more Yugoslavs, or if Janković had not uncovered the falsified resumes, the outcome might have been different.

RUTH MITCHELL AND THE CHETNIKS

The Yugoslav state is especially central to our last case of ethnic crossover, Ruth Mitchell. An American, Mitchell first arrived in the Balkans as a correspondent for a British newspaper and a wife of a British diplomat in Albania (*The Lady Guerilla*, 1944; Mitchell, 1943). Mitchell was initially indifferent to the Serbs (Mitchell, 1943: 7). Yet as Mitchell relates, “the more I saw of them, the more they filled me with affection and admiration (Mitchell, 1943: 9). Like Calhoun, Mitchell saw the Serbs as the Americans of Europe, writing that “the Serbian Chetniks are the product of a purely Serbian tradition, a Serbian way of life and ideal, just as much as the American frontiersmen were the product of purely American conditions and American pioneering ideals. The American and the Serbian ideals are the same: the great ideal of liberty” (Mitchell, 1943: 37). This was an ironic mirror to contemporary prejudice against the Balkans, in which the Balkans was imagined as a window into Europe’s past and a wild frontier filled with “noble savages”—although in these cases, this sparked admiration rather than contempt (Todorova, 2009: 107, 111, 120).

Admiration turned to identification. By 1939, Mitchell writes, “I began to feel as if *Serbia were my real home, the place where I was meant to be* [emphasis mine]” (1943: 40). In her memoirs, she claimed broad knowledge of Serbian culture: collecting epic poems, antique weapons, icons, and rugs and trekking into the mountains to view frescos in crumbling monasteries. Mitchell learned ballads for the *gusla*, a traditional string instrument. And, after a couple of years, she acquired (basic) proficiency in the Serbian language (Mitchell, 1943: 29–45).

Identification became affiliation. In November 1940, Mitchell joined the Chetniks, a far-right Serbian paramilitary organization, her subgroup being led by Kosta

Pećanac (Mitchell, 1943: 34–35). Even then, Pećanac was notoriously brutal toward Yugoslavia's Macedonian and Muslim populations—Mitchell, enamored, described him as a “great fighter” and a “perfect viking of a fellow” (Newman, 2013; Mitchell, 1943: 35). Timing also played a role—on October 28, just before Mitchell joined Pećanac, Italy invaded Greece. If fascists invaded Yugoslavia (as they would in April 1941), the Chetniks seemed likely to resist them. And so, Mitchell enlisted, swearing a short oath: “Till death for Serbia, by the help of God” (Mitchell, 1943: 50).

After joining the Chetniks, Mitchell worked as a spy, attending British and American diplomatic mixers, traveling around Yugoslavia to feel out public opinion, and identifying and feeding false information to German agents (Mitchell, 1943: 51–60). For whom Mitchell spied, however, is ambiguous. German and Italian intelligence suspected Britain, as did the Yugoslav secret police in early 1940—before she had joined the Chetniks (Mitchell, 1943: 17, 40, 43–44, 52–59). As Mitchell recounts:

When I first arrived, there were acrid arguments in government offices as to whether I was or was not a British secret service agent. It was apparently the thing fiercely to take sides [...] My leading champion, tired of it all, had a brilliant inspiration. “Well,” he said suddenly one day, “well—and why not?” [...] “Well—and why not?” became my household joke (Mitchell, 1943: 52).

Why not, indeed? Elsewhere in her book, Mitchell hints at her assignment:

My own role was to be this: if the British succeeded in landing in force on the Greek coast and coming up through Macedonia, I was to act as liaison officer on the Chetnik staff [...] If the British did not succeed in getting through, my job would be to act as intelligence officer, spy, in the most important place I could get to. America was not yet in the war, and my American passport would be invaluable (Mitchell, 1943: 85).

When Nazi Germany invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941, Mitchell continued to spy for Pećanac's Chetnik band (Mitchell, 1943: 124–152). Operating behind enemy lines, Mitchell was captured in May 1941 and charged with spying for Britain (Mitchell, 1943: 153). She spent over a year in German captivity before being returned to the United States via a prisoner exchange in June 1942 (Mitchell, 1943: 238).

Shortly after her return to the United States, Mitchell began writing articles for *Srbobran*, the most widely circulated Serbian-language newspaper in the United States, and for the main organ of the Serbian National Federation (SNF), an immigrant self-help society (OSS, 1942). She had arrived at an opportune moment—*Srbobran*'s editorial policy had just undergone a *volte-face*, prompted by massacres of Serbs carried out by the Independent State of Croatia. These massacres, *Srbobran* argued, made Yugoslavism a dead letter (Lees, 2007). After these revelations, a militant subsidiary to the Serbian National Union emerged: the Serbian National Defense (SND) (Parry, 1942, 1943; OSS, 1943). The SNF, SND, and *Srbobran* now supported

Serbian independence, rather than Yugoslavia, as did Mitchell, who believed that Croats were intrinsically “a guilty race” (Mitchell, 1943: 246).

Not all Serbs followed suit—a substantial fraction supported Tito as part of the United Committee of South Slavic Americans, founded in 1943. Likewise, at least some within the SNU remained sympathetic to Yugoslavism, despite the editorializing in *Srbobran* (Larson, 2020: 311–312, 322). Nonetheless, *Srbobran’s* readers were desperate for information about their homeland, and Mitchell had been there in person. Mitchell, in turn, may have sought publicity for her wartime memoirs, which she would publish in 1943 (Ivanovich, 1943). It was a natural partnership—what did it matter that Mitchell was not a Serb?

Although Mitchell was working against the interests of the Yugoslav state, its government-in-exile was paralyzed by infighting between Serbian and Croatian ministers. Moreover, the head of the Yugoslav legation, Konstantin Fotić, had abandoned Yugoslavism for Serbian nationalism—a fact of which the government in exile was aware but powerless to address (Pavlowitch, 1981). In October 1942, Fotić recommended to the foreign ministry that Mitchell be awarded a medal—just as consul Vukmirović had with Johann Blose (Fotić, 1942). Fotić may have also supplied Mitchell with documentation of Ustaša massacres in occupied Yugoslavia in late 1942. The Yugoslav Information Center in New York let slip that Mitchell had been “inspired by the embassy,” which Fotić denied to the foreign ministry (Yugoslav Foreign Ministry, 1942).

Fotić’s endorsement and support gave Mitchell real clout among Serbian American organizations—Fotić could quash or plant articles at will in *Srbobran*, the main Serbian-American newspaper (Fotić, 1943b, 1943c; Jovanović, 1943; Poole, 1942). *Srbobran* immediately accepted Mitchell as one of their own—the front page of the December 2, 1942, issue of *Srbobran* called Mitchell a “great friend of the Serbian people” and “our sister and heroine” (Ivanovich, 1943). Mitchell even became the honorary president of the Serbian National Defense (Vukmirović, 1943).

In July 1943, the secretary of the Serbian National Defense, Filip Marković, sent a threatening letter to another representative of the Yugoslav government-in-exile, Sava Kosanović, a Serb, who had been attempting (with limited success) to curb Mitchell’s activities. In this letter, Marković promised that “if I see in the newspapers any more attacks on our Serbian Knightly Chetnik Ruth Mitchell [sic] [...] I will break all the bones, which the Germanic Croats put in your body” (Marković, 1943). Kosanović went to the police, Marković was arrested and put on trial, and Mitchell was dragged in as a codefendant. After a perfunctory trial, the judge reprimanded all parties and advised them to “restrain from factional strife on behalf of the war effort” (Serb Patriot Held in Yugoslav Row, 1943; Serb Warned on Threat, 1943b).

Following this episode, Mitchell disengaged from Serbian emigrant politics. Aside from the threat of retribution from the US government, she also had less to gain. After the Tehran conference of November 1943, American support switched from Mihailović’s Chetniks to Tito’s Partisans, undercutting the Yugoslav government

in exile. As that government-in-exile dissolved into dysfunction and irrelevancy during 1944 and 1945 and Tito's Partisans liberated more of Yugoslavia from fascist occupation, Mitchell's relationship with Serbian nationalists frayed. Mitchell wanted more—more money in speaking fees and even, allegedly, a colonelship from Draža Mihailović (Butts, 1943). By the beginning of 1945, Mitchell and the Serbian far-right had parted ways. As the head of the Serbian National Federation quipped: "She is busy with other things these days, not our Serbian plight. Small loss to us, really" (OSS, 1945).

CONCLUSION

Given how it ended, Mitchell's story reaffirms the importance of the state to those who navigated a fluid field of ethnic identity in the United States—Mitchell remained committed to the greater-Serbianists only so long as the American government also supported Draža Mihailović and the Yugoslav government-in-exile remained a factor. Yet this is not to say Mitchell or her Serbophile predecessors were motivated purely by cynical calculation. Despite the prejudices of the time, it is worth underlining that all our cases seem to have felt a genuine cultural admiration for the Serbs that sometimes, but not always, led to nationalist activism.

The Yugoslav state, meanwhile, attempted to control which outsiders were permitted to become Serbian national activists. In so doing, diplomats, hardly a monolithic bloc, were guided by a mix of caprice and geopolitical calculation. While this did not lead to a coherent policy toward these Serbophiles, one pattern that emerges is the relative irrelevance of ethnicity to nationalist activism during these years. Serbian organizations and political life were, I argue, largely "open to the public."

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POVZETEK

ODPRTO ZA JAVNOST: SRBI IN ETNIČNI PREHOD V ZDRUŽENIH DRŽAVAH AMERIKE

Ethan LARSON

V prvi polovici devetnajstega stoletja je več Američanov, ki jih je privlačila srbska ljudska kultura, postalo zagovornikov srbskoameriške kulture in političnih interesov. Vseh pet je pritegnila tradicionalna vizija srbske kulture, ki so ji bili izpostavljeni zaradi medkulturnih zakonskih zvez ali zaposlitvenih okoliščin. Priseljenci so na drugi strani te tujce sprejeli, tudi ko so ti prevzeli vodilne vloge v svojih organizacijah.

Odločitev diplomatov o tem, ali bodo tem Nesrbom pomagali, je bila odvisna od mešanice pragmatizma in predsodkov – čeprav je bila etnična pripadnost določenega srbofila pri tem le redko odločilni dejavnik. Kot bi pričakovali v 1930ih, so bili diplomati deljenih mnenj glede sprejemanja Judov – nekateri med njimi so nasprotovali njihovemu sodelovanju v srbskem javnem življenju. Vendar pa teh nasprotovanj niso vedno tudi udejanjili.

Če se vrnemo k teoriji – sodobne razprave o transetičnosti se osredotočajo na to, kako so ameriška država in sodobni diskurzi vplivali na krepitev ali rahljanje etničnih in rasnih meja. Navsezadnje nam lahko ti primeri, čeprav potrjujejo pomen države, služijo kot opomnik, da ZDA niso bile edini (v teh primerih pa niti ne najvplivnejši) arbiter o etnični pripadnosti.