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PSEUDO-EUROPEAN VIEW AMONG THE RUINS OF ORIENT: CITY OF SKOPJE IN YUGOSLAV NATIONAL POLICY 1918-1941

Abstract: This socio-historical sketching of Skopje is an attempt to contemplate on modernization circumstances and conditions that had to produce there "a veritable social revolution". Through the authentic officials' reports and plans, it was possible to deal with Yugoslav government's acting and intentions, its efficiency, but also to perceive social background of urbanization as well as to measure the obstructing influence of prevailed feudal tradition.

Key words: urban history, Skopje, Macedonia, Interwar Yugoslavia, Orient, modernization, urbanization

As we have just mentioned above, the subject of this work is adapted to perceive the integration processes of the former Turkish areas into the system of newly founded country (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), which were hindered by ethnical and religious diversity, feudal habits and mentality, as well as by cultural neglecting. We also had to explore some determining elements that formed social dynamics of the city, designating local characteristics and development of different social groups. Both historical and sociological observation of tradition, politics, economy, culture and fragments from everyday's life were useful to comprehend collision and burning through traditional and modern, as well as to recognize the urban development and new functions of town arisen from new political, economical and cultural reality. The main sources used in this text include unpublished material from Belgrade archives (Archives of Yugoslavia, Archives of Serbian Academy of Science and Arts), published statistics, parliamentary debates in shorthand, relevant periodicals and literature.

*Skopje has been lying on vital trans-Balkan communications for over two thousand years, but its development has been followed by rapid demographic oscillations. These were caused by pillage and demolition of many conquerors or by natural disasters (earthquake, fire, plague, malaria). At the end of the seventeenth century Skopje had almost 60,000 inhabitants, and at the beginning of nineteenth it decreased to 6,000 people! Persistent demographic expanding started to rise from the middle of that century, when Skopje became a political center of the Kosovo Vilayet and significant transit-point on the new railroad track between Belgrade and Thessalonica (Kostić, 1925: 26-32; Radovanović, 1927: 5-8).
After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and forming of Yugoslavia (1918), Skopje became the center of new Serbian/Yugoslav province called "South Serbia". Serbian politicians and geographers had agreed that Skopje was an essential part and natural middle point of the Balkan Peninsula (Cvijić, 1927: 118-125; Radovanović, 1937, 12-13; Hadži Vasiljević, 1930: 50-62). On the eve of the First Balkans War this town on the Vardar River had over 47.000 inhabitants. According to official Yugoslav censuses Skopje expanded from 41.066 in 1921 to 69.269 in 1926, but also started to stagnate in the next few years. Although the countryside was impoverished and devastated by banditry, warfare and ethnic migrations (1912-18), Skopje faced the unexpected proportional growth of all religions (Christian, Islamic and Jewish inhabitants)! Even the Catholics grew in number (according to parish-register almost 18.000 Macedonian Catholics took the sacrament in Skopje from the beginning of 1930s). This multicultural phenomenon was based on specific political and economical role that Yugoslav state had assigned to Skopje: this town had to symbolize a strong national unity, political stability and complete safety for all inhabitants in "dangerous" province. Hence in 1926 there were living together 38.000 Macedonian Slavs (Macedonians, Serbs, and Bulgarians), 13.000 Turks, 2.000 Albanians and 2.500 Jews (Jovanović, 2004: 100-102).

The town was placed on the north-west edge of the plain, with gradual run over the slopes of mountains, and on the South it was rimmed by swamp area. Remarkably fast the flow of greenish Vardar was dividing its center into a hilly old settlement on the left bank, and pebbly colony on the plain, right riverside (Novaković, 1927: 387). Summers in Skopje with broiling heat, soft winters, intolerable March air, marsh-fever and strong wind - those are the main weather marks that citizens themselves used to describe as unhealthy. Extremely low temperatures were noticed in February (-19°C), until the hottest season has been shown in August (+41°C). Aside from Radovište, Skopje was the hottest town in the South (SGKJ, 1932: 25-45).

Skopje resembled a boom town, where marble edifice rears over jerry-built structure; a rambling bazaar quarter, its dilapidated mosques, street types - all the characteristics of some 'ramshackle town in Asia Minor'. Oft-repeated impressions of some foreign passengers were unanimous that Skopje was a kind of pseudo-European city, a weird amalgamation of Asiatic and late-byzantine influences (Chater, 1930: 281). This symbolic picturesque inheritance from Turkish times contributed to strengthen conspicuous visual contrasts - that on one bank of the Vardar Skopje struggled to be European, while the other remained to be so Asiatic. Even domestic travelers bore out with their bad sensations related to stereotypes about the appearance of Skopje ('backwardness' and 'disgust' of Orient, 'the darkest side of Balkans', 'heterogeneity' of Skopje, 'City of fatalists', 'Gypsy town', carelessness, laziness, vehemence, etc.). A French traveler was comparing the old quarters of Skopje with several Syrian towns, and finally, he concluded that Damascus or Aleppo were only 'the dark
Turkish monstrosities’ towards the bazaars of Skopje! Striking scenes of barefooted boys in oriental costumes snatching the baggage on the railroad station, dusty streets and invasion of mosquitoes and flies - that was a usual feeling of any passenger who had just arrived in Skopje (*Jugoslavija*, 1927: 389-396). A Polish actress said after she had arrived in Skopje, that she found herself in a whirl of frescoes, mosques, minarets and oriental bazaars, hesitating what was warmer in that charming milieu: was it wine, air, life, or sky? An atmosphere of irritation and disturbance in suburbs was even more impressive: “...There are no police and no taxes here... Strange, motley and wanton jumble, squealing sounds of zurle and thin violins... And when the restless night starts to fall it seem that life is dying out...” (*Vardar*, 94/1933: 6).

**Political surroundings**

Nevertheless, according to its geographical and national 'predestination' Skopje became a serious political and military center of the province. There were situated all state departments, including eight diplomatic missions and numerous government administration. Greece, England, Italy, Turkey, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Sweden and France owned their regular and titular consulates in Skopje (JZ, 1929: 748). Furthermore, Skopje was a seat of the gendarmeries and army's headquarters, as a result of elongated state of war, armed incidents on the Bulgarian and Albanian borders, vital guerilla's movements, unsuccessful disarmament, etc. Unceasing riots and mobilization contributed to spreading the opinion that the Third army was some command for punished officers. Headquarters of infantry, artillery, and the air forces were also situated in Skopje (Bjelajac, 1988: 73-74, 302-303; Apostolov, 1962: 59).

With a very few exceptions, political climate in Skopje was not fulfilled with tension as well as it was at the rest of the province. Immense presence of government's armed forces in town made it free from any physical danger (terrorist attacks in other parts of the province were common), but, at the same time, it created a solid basis for embarrassments (freedom of the press, speech and assembly, personal liberty and fear of new regime, incidents and threats during elections, etc.). With politically transformed guerillas, overcrowded courts and prisons, 'flying squads' on its streets, Skopje appeared to be a town of strange contrasts and confusion.¹

Free political meetings at the most famous city hotels and restaurants could show more liberal and loose atmosphere than it was at the other southern cities, although through the official reports one could find a systematic eavesdropping of Muslims, communists and 'bulgarists', especially on the eve of parliamentary elections. Existence of Muslim political organization "Cemivet" (*Southern Moslems Society*) and its journal "Hak" (*Justice*) also could effect that

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¹AY, 14, file 8, unit 28, doc. 609, 618, 619, 620, 622; 14-76-257, doc. 9, 26, 32, 34, 55.
there was a solid spirit of toleration in town, but after the party was banned (1925), things looked quite the opposite.\textsuperscript{2}

In that way, armed quasi-government groups on the streets, threatening to disobedient electorate (with removal into Turkey, dishonest tobacco purchase) as well as the estimations of authorities that in 1923 there was 7/8 of voters in Skopje who were 'against the government and national interests', had to render the strengthening of regime's Radical party more objective.\textsuperscript{3} Social setting of Skopje was an attractive place for communists which gained a great majority at the town hall in 1920, thanks to their obstinate speeches in favour of Macedonian autonomy (Katardžiev, 1961: 59-76; Dimitrijević, 2001: 369-373).

In Skopje were situated High Court of Appeal and the state prison, too. It is interesting to notice that the jail was regularly double exceeding its own capacity (650 prisoners). At the same time, prison personnel were permanently growing, while finances reduced twice (IZ, 1929: 379; SGKJ, 1932: 470-473). There were 35 lawyers in the whole town (all of them were Serbs, except one Turkish lawyer), and several shysters. The most prominent citizens were members of Rotary-club (\textit{Azbučni imenik}: s. p).

\textbf{Building of New Skopje: economical milieu}

Besides prevalent feudal habits and mentality on the left riverbank, Skopje attained great importance as the commercial and distributing center of the province. It was the key junction at the region (railways and highway to the Aegean Sea and Asia Minor), with obvious strategic, financial and trade significance. Leading state banks (National bank, Mortgage bank, Postal savings bank) took part in financing the army, restoration and building of Skopje, opium trade, etc. There were also several private banks led by well-known local politicians (Gavrilović, 1931: 18-19, 35-37). After the foundation of the Chamber of Commerce in 1921 economical problems of the city were not solved. Traffic inferiority of mines and centers of opium and tobacco production, abuse of high communal taxes and political background of financial currents - did not stop.\textsuperscript{4}

An oriental type of patriarchal trading was dominant on the ancient city bazaars. Asiatic look of the market-place with huge presence of Gypsies (there was 7,500 Gypsies in 1931) could intensify the impression of 'backwardness' and 'laziness' that foreign travellers used to mention (Trifunoski, 1991: 286-289). Social workers registered 260 beggars on the crowded streets of downtown (\textit{Vardar}, 46-47/1933: 21). The central market place was the Bit-bazaar on the left riverbank. This name has remained the same for Old Skopje till today which might evidence how important this market was. In the middle of 1920s at this expensive town had been working 1,335 artisans and 2,785 merchants (420

\textsuperscript{2}AY, 14-76-257, doc. 32, 34.

\textsuperscript{3}ASANU, coll. 13315/73, pp. 1-9; AY, 14-8-28, doc. 620.

\textsuperscript{4}AY, 65-159-504.
Turkish shops). Industrial base of town included three stock companies (milling industry, beer, woodworks) and dozen of small private factories manufacturing food, alcoholic drinks, soap, chemistry, leather, and furniture (Petrović, 1940, 42-62; Sidovski, 1958: 91-104; Topalović, 1927: 42-47).

Social structure of working-people shows some interesting details: only 11% of inhabitants in Skopje did work (in handicraft, industry and trade predominantly); almost half of them were uneducated and without any qualifications; 27% of employed persons were female (73% of them were unmarried women) and they mostly worked in industry (38%); 83% of workers were younger than forty years; while the most of male workers had been employed in monopoly industry (tobacco, opium), women predominated in textile industry and domestics; male artisans were mostly hired among tailors and shoemakers; striking absence of women was particularly obvious between innkeepers, in trade companies, city administration and transportation (Purić, 1939: 139-144).

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Starting the plant power-station for 70,000 consumers in 1924 was the first real social transformation in the city. In truth, there were several small power-stations which produced current for their needs (cinemas, hotels, military hospital, brewery, etc.). After the electrification by German company "A. E. G.", almost 80% of citizens started to use bulbs instead petroleum lamps (Vardar, 46-47/1933: 16).

During the first decade of its existence, Yugoslav state had constructed 1,242 buildings in Skopje, mostly from 1923 up to 1927. In 1930 authorities reckoned about 20,000 existing objects, but they also noticed that there was no city planning and water-supply system yet, in spite the fact that the mayor Mr. Josif Mihailovic was an architect (SLVB, 133/1932: 3).

Building a showy and expensive edifice was concentrated on the central city square near the Vardar River. Elisabeth Barker wrote about 'several showy buildings' as a sole Yugoslav acquisition in Macedonia (Barker, 1950: 23). The famous Officer's Dome was the most elegant building on the Balkans that was grown up into a meeting center of military and political elite. 'The European gate of Skopje' was constructed in 1928 with luxury restaurant on its roof. On the occasion of that building authorities pulled down monumental Burmaly mosque (Kadijević, 2001: 246-249). Demolition of well-located mosques for the sake of government's buildings claimed to be a sin towards the past, but often covered by sarcastic official remarks that 'there is always something painful at progress' (Jugoslavija, 1927: 405-415). Just until 1922 municipal authorities in Skopje appropriated seven Muslim graveyards, and four mosques of total 83 vakuf properties in Skopje (Stojadinović, 1931: 28-30). Even the King Alexander proclaimed that, since Skopje belonged to the West, it
had to accommodate itself to European culture by 'throwing away with outdated' (Kara Radovanović, 1937: 589). Military center status of the city contributed to enlarging investments in such objects: army barracks, flats for officers, the Third army's headquarters, airport, military hospital, powder magazines, etc.

More than a half of total municipal investments were spent in improving the streets from 1919 to 1931, even supposing there was a low traffic intensity, since the most of vehicles belonged to the military and postal services. Over 15 million dinars were invested in repairing the streets, 5,5 for new school buildings, 3,2 in parks and squares' arrangement, 1,6 in government buildings, 0,44 for the city lighting, 0,42 millions on sewerage, etc (Pregled, 1934: IV). At the same time, authorities did not even touch the ground 'with pick or spade' on the left riverbank, except old Turkish quarters that were renamed (Kara Radovanović, 1937: 588; IMN 4: 170). On the contrary, on the flat-ground was developing a new city with its two parallel streets, connecting the railroad station with central square near 'Stone Bridge'. Carriages and automobiles raced on these streets as if it was some real metropolis. A crowded footpath at the Islahana Park near Vardar was the most popular promenade, where one could see the people walking in various national costumes: Turkish fezzes, Muslim woman's veils, Serbian traditional caps, Albanian white caps, but also Parisian dresses, European hats, etc (Jugoslavija, 1927: 400-405).

The road traffic appeared poor intensity, even related to Yugoslav average. In 1929 there were about a thousand vehicles, predominantly American cars, buses and trucks, and motorcycles made in Europe (SGKJ, 1932: 190-191; Jubilarne knjiga: 278). In Skopje were placed several Sphinx gas-stations (Standard Oil, Shell), six auto garages and one auto mechanic (Godišnjak: 157-160, 269-274). Political initiative was decisive for opening the civil air line Belgrade-Skopje in 1929, and the international airport in Skopje. It was the second Yugoslav air line (the first was Belgrade-Zagreb). In spite of cheap tickets, passenger planes flew almost empty and such unprofitable flies were thinned out on three times a week (Jubilarne knjiga: 286-289).

Revolutionary development of post-office system even exceeded needs of the poor region. Great activity of that system (telegraphs and telephones) could make an illusion of social progress, but it was used, however, mostly by government and military institutions. Some German companies (Telefunken, Telefonfabrik Berliner) had drawn out miles of phone-cables and telegraph constructions in Skopje on the basis of World War reparations. Hence, the town was connected to significant political centers at Yugoslav neighborhood (Thessalonica, Tirana, Sofia). The fact, that postal regional central of Skopje did not evidence any international phone call in 1929 could indirectly show how political tensions were as well as the effects of military phone-censoring (SPTT: 5, 10, 21-23, 27-28; SGKJ, 1932: 497).

Several hotels (Bristol, Splendid, Serbian Queen, Moscow, Serbian King), two old bridges ('stone' and 'iron'), modern buildings on the central square, 48 mosques, Turkish baths, Roman aqueduct and nine Orthodox
churches - that was an exotic tourist attraction, in the same manner as bars, beer saloons, cinemas and taverns by the river were. In spite of high provincial taxes, hotels in Skopje disposed with 475 rooms which were visited by 31.086 guests in 1929 (94% were Yugoslavs). At the same year hotels near the Vardar quay booked 74,042 quarters for the night. In 1928 two university professors founded organization 'South', which aimed to promote tourist superiority of Skopje (Hadži Vasiljević, 1930: 69-78; SGKJ, 1932: 322-323).

Citizens of Skopje (both Muslims and Christians) began to spend their time at the restaurants, bars, beer saloons, cinemas and hotels instead of traditionally day trippers. A jazz-band playing at the Paris restaurant, obviously did not affect passersby as much as the river strand did, which citizens had wittily called 'the Island of love' (Vardar, 111/1933: 3). At early 1920s the people of Skopje were considered for extremely moral population, but it was also known that it used to drink too much and passionately smoke. A decade later, it seemed that erosion of high morality irretrievable began. Those mixed emotions of postwar trauma, desperately expected freedom and oriental hedonism, combined with new living conditions in town overfilled by soldiers (Yugoslav and French allies), resulted in spread of venereal diseases, homosexual phenomenon in Turkish baths as well as unbridle behavior of wealthy Jewish youth, who were the most fashionable at the same time (Hadži Vasiljević, 1930: 176-179).

During this decade bars and taverns in Skopje were employed as proper places for political meetings and auction sales. A dozen of night-bars were unhidden breeding places of prostitution, tolerated by authorities 'in the interest of public safety', as the city police' chief said! The other restaurants had to harmonize their activities with the law and political acquaintance: fancy French Club, national Crown-prince Alexander, gambling house Bayli Han, bordello Golden Prague, etc (Jugoslavija, 1927: 454-455).

Cultural and social view

Yugoslav state had been supporting eight elementary schools in town (three of them were Muslim's, one was Jewish), but low grade of enlightenment (there was 83% illiterate people in the province), small salaries, conservatism of teachers from pre-war period and political motives of their displacing were only some of the problems which caused troubles in teaching process. Unsuccessful education was obvious in number of incomplete pupils (only 451 have finished school from 2,810 pupils). There were 52 elementary schools in the district of Skopje where the Turkish was a teaching language (IZ, 1929: 740).

Just as the World War One had finished, the Gymnasium in Skopje began to consolidate (during the war its building was turned into military

7AY, 74-51-71, 65-159-504, 65-1026-1944.
8ASANU, 13315/91, 1-3.
9AY, 66-1856-1871, 66-1859-1874, 66-1491-1628; 335-26.
hospital). From 1918 to 1925 over 160 teachers were employed for the school, and many of them were hired from Russian refugees. In 1924 a female gymnasium set apart from existing grammar school, but irregular scholarships and poor aliment caused very low educational level. Declared government's care was refuted by long periods during the school was without boarding-school, mess room, medical supervise and heating (Spomenica, 1934: 74, 122). 

After the foundation of 'Sokoli' society at the Gymnasium (1923) Skopje got its own soko' district named Prince Mark. There were more than 5,000 members who got their Dome in 1927, promoting hale condition and strong national unity as well (SDSM, 1940: 16-18). The first football club was founded in Skopje in 1919 and it became famous as the "S. S. C" (Skopje Sport Club). From 1933 it began to compete at the Southern Cup, till their city rival (F.C. Slavia) became a member of Yugoslav championship, though only in 1935 (Pedeset godini: 39).

In 1924 the Great state medresa King Alexander was established in Skopje where fifty young Muslims were acquiring their religious knowledge in official (Serbian) language. Further education on faculties was possible only if they graduated at the state medresa. At the same time, there were 73 private medresas in the province whose scholars had not been able to advance. Pedagogical school in Skopje started to work in 1919, but more than half of scholars abandoned it because of bad conditions. Even if it had its own building in 1922 Pedagogical school was neglected as a center of communism (Apostolov, 1978: 396-397).

Development of high-school system in the province began in 1920 when the Faculty of Philosophy was founded in Skopje. Social and ethnic structure of students (80% were female) can refer us to possible purpose of its establishing: was it an educational center for the government employees' children!? Anyway, individual engagement of some enthusiastic professors contributed to arising of Faculty into a center of scientific and cultural assembling. Certainly, national policy colored many directions of such 'cultural action'. On the other side, the fact that only 5.7% of students had graduated, caused reduction of the State's scholarships. Frequent rumours about closing the faculty because of financial impossibility were in fact provoked by political incidents, such were communists and Macedonian independence promoters (Treu, 1930: 7-9; Memorandum: 17-20).

Several university professors established in Skopje a scientific society, museum and the state archives, although those institutions had strong national marks. In 1923 the National University started to give public lectures, as an adult educational center (Ilievski, 1979: 158-159). The Scientific Society of Skopje, established in 1921 was aiming to publish historical and ethnographic literature, especially after its inclusion into the national budget (SND, 1928: 5-9). Two

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10AY, 66-871-1290.
11AY, 63-157-694; 66-1101-1429.
years later the very same scientists have founded The Museum of South Serbia which was exploring antique and mediaeval monuments (photo, preservation, protection of monuments). However, in 1926 the zoological section within the Museum begun to work (Radovanović, 1928: 386-406). At the same year in Skopje was founded the department of State archives which was permanently hindered by communal authorities, mostly in housing problems.\(^{12}\) City libraries were covered up with national literature, gifts of government and national associations, as well as the singers' societies (Mokranjac, Vardar) were trying to promote Serbian national songs as a proper tradition (Georgievski, 1982: 160-167).\(^{13}\)

The National Theater (1913) was reconstructed as a result of searching for an appropriate model of 'national cultivating the South'. The administration of B. Nušić worked under very complex conditions, managing to reconcile the contrasts between ethnically mixed audience (without a theatrical tradition) and contemporary theater which, owing to its actors and effective advertising posters, tended to reach the highest world standards. Construction of its new building in 1927 was one of the most expensive undertakings in the State in that time.\(^{14}\) During the 1920s in Skopje worked several cinemas (Apollo, Balkan, Vardar) although they were treated as industrial enterprises.\(^{15}\)

* Feudal mentality and different religious beliefs were present in health culture, too: avoiding vaccination, belief that malaria was transmittable by plums and melons, fear of 'new things', disbelief in quinine provided by the State free of charge, estimations that 80% people did not use soap, despite the fact that Skopje was one of the biggest manufacturers of this article - these are the facts explaining very modest effects of the health policy of that time (Jovanović, 2002: 385).

There was a district and military hospital in Skopje, and, owing to unsettled climate and wide-spread malaria there was fully equipped Institute for tropical diseases. The enlargement of district hospital capacities was presented as a necessity of humane and national needs, so in March 1930 it removed into a new building with 250 beds. Just from 1928 to 1931 there were accomplished 850.000 medical supervises free of charge and granted 3.300 kg of quinine (Vardar, 62/1933: 1).\(^{16}\) During 1929 the ambulance for the insured citizens carried out 437 complex operations, 924 accouchements at its maternity section, and so on (SLVB, 12/1930: 7).

Frequent epidemics of influenza, scarlet fever, typhoid and malaria were the most intensive at the first half of twenties. From 1926 to 1930 at the

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\(^{12}\) AY, 66-336-571.

\(^{13}\) More documents on spreading the Serbian epic literature among the schools of Skopje: AY, 66-871-1290, doc. 13600/25; 74-54-75; 66-871-1290.

\(^{14}\) AY, 66-354-593.

\(^{15}\) AY, 65-159-504.

\(^{16}\) AY, 39-2-2.
Gypsy's suburb of Skopje there were 265 typhoid people, and just in 1930 over 130 got ill (Vardar, 78/1933: 2). The army had similar problems, so the garrison in Skopje was crowded with sick Yugoslav soldiers. Their annual reports indicated inhuman housing, unsettled climate, deficiency of quinine and mosquito nets, spoilt vaccines and bad control of officers who were transmitting venereal diseases from the town.17

After the Belgrade biological laboratory had paid really scaring attention to malaria, government started to build the Institute for tropical diseases in Skopje (1922). Its modern equipment and professional staff inspired a French scientist Jacques Ancel to write about Serbian doctors who 'invaded' Macedonia. Even the League of Nations started to send young doctors in order to spend their training period in Skopje (Rankov, 1937: 137-139). Just in 1931 Institute laboratory accomplished 25.000 medical examinations (SLVB, 81/1931: 4). After the most enterprising merchants in Skopje have noticed the importance and worth of remedies, ten private pharmacies began operating there already in 1924 (Državni kalendar: 24-25).

As we could see, political, national and military significance of Skopje has determined its social structure specifying the level and rhythm of urbanization. It seemed that the best area for advocacy and explanation of the government's optimism was the space burdened with regressive feudal heritage, where even a small step forward was easy to be noticed. For that reason Yugoslavia's 'metamorphoses' were nowhere more expressed than in Skopje with its two riverbanks, symbolizing two epochs till today.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL:

AY
Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade,
• collection 14 (Ministry of Interior)
• collection 63 (Ministry of Justice)
• collection 65 (Ministry of Trading and Industry)
• collection 66 (Ministry of Education)
• collection 74 (The Court of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia)

ASANU
Archive of Serbian Academy of Science and Arts, Belgrade

17 AY, 66-1859-1874; 66-1856-1871; 69-160-245.
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