

The Republics of the Former Yugoslavia: Independent States or Yugoslav People?

Introduction

Ethnicity is a complex subject. An ethnic group must have a distinct physical or racial characteristic if it is to be considered. It can therefore be claimed that Yugoslavia was not an ethnic conflict. As Pfaff¹ indicates, "Yugoslavia's ethnic war is waged among three communities possessing no distinct physical characteristics or separate anthropological or racial origins...The notion of an exclusive, and exclusionary ethnic existence for each of the Yugoslav peoples is an invention..." However the groups did vary culturally, linguistically and religiously providing Nationalism with a window of opportunity. Whether the peoples of Yugoslavia were individual ethnic groups is not the issue it is simply the fact that they believed it to be the case; Ethnic groups once they have stressed their identity are a threat and will attempt to unite together regardless of territory or borders.

The Cold war kept a lid on the ethnic disputes that raged. Each group united under a bloc for security purposes. The end of the Cold war saw the need for the ideological security coalitions dwindle. This lack of concentration on regional disputes allows the increase in ethnic claims that emerged in the former Yugoslavia and globally. It can be argued that Communism was replaced by Nationalism.

Wright² in 1942 found that new nations were more likely to go to war and to hold strong nationalistic feelings as they search for 'their' territory and 'history' to be proud of; it is part of the birthing process and the stirring of pride. Schopflin³ argued that Nationalism was an attempt to recreate the system, to find a path after the collapse of Communism. However, Schopflin must be criticised, Nationalism alone cannot govern a state; It was part of the Communist system and part of the Communist legacy rather than an ideology emerging out of the Communist rubble.

Modelski⁴ wrote, "Every war has two faces. It is a conflict both between and within political systems, both external and internal... internal wars affect the international system... the international system affect internal wars..." Modelski's quote indicates that the debate in Yugoslavia was over which path to take The fall of Communism left a void to be filled by an alternative; In Yugoslavia this alternative was swathed in the tendrils of Nationalism.

Yugoslavia was founded as a state consisting of numerous regions and identities. In Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia Hercegovina the majority of the population were Serbian; Croatia's populations was one fifth Serb; Slovenia had a German minority; Dalmatia consisted of Croats, Italians, Serbs, and Jews; Vojvodina's population was Serb, Magyar, Croat, Slovak, German and Romanian; Kosovo was a mix of Serbs and Albanian Muslims; and Macedonia with Macedonians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Greeks, Turks, Jews, Albanians, Vlachs, and Gypsies.

Even with the high mix of identities both pre and post war ideas emerged that led to the construction of a state that united the Southern Slavs. Garasanin suggested an Illyrian kingdom, whilst Strossmayer stressed the union be along the lines of a common culture and language. On the 20th July 1917 the Corfu declaration was signed uniting the above people in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia under a Karadjeordevic king. The three tribes, Croat, Serb, and Slovene were recognised as separate entities from day one with each given a separate flag, and all three

¹ Malcolm "Bosnia: a short history" Macmillan 1996

² Malcolm "Bosnia: a short history" Macmillan 1996

³ Schopflin "Politics in Eastern Europe" Blackwell 1994

⁴ Schopflin "Politics in Eastern Europe" Blackwell 1994

religions and both languages accepted by the state. Yet with no mention of future relations the three tribes were left to their own devices. Eventually after conflict between the National Council and the Serbian Government, a Serb led state allied with Bosnia, Vojvodina, and Montenegro emerged. The alienation of Zagreb led to the Croats formulating its own future without regard to the new state.

Yugoslavia was born in war, created in conflict, and existed in turmoil. It was the brainchild of the intellectuals who took into account economic and security matters over the ethnic and regional questions. Yugoslavia was born to fulfil Yugoslavia's needs not the needs of the Republics, but as history has shown us Yugoslavia never really was.

Serbia

Although the other Yugoslav Republics did aggravate the situation, there can be little doubt that Serbia was primarily responsible for the collapse of the Federation and the ensuing war.

In 1815 an autonomous Serbia was founded under the guiding hand of the Ottoman Empire. With the departure of the Ottomans in 1867 Serbia finally regained independence under the 1878 Conference of Berlin re-establishing the boundaries of the pre Battle of Kosovo Serbia. Serbia although economically backward was an ambitious state and due to the threat from the 1908 annexation of Bosnia by the Austro Hungarian Empire, saw itself as central to the future of the South Slavs. It was this perceived threat to independence that saw the contemporary distrust of the Germans and their allies Croatia and Slovenia emerge. This threat also meant that the direction of Serbian nationalism shifted away from Pan Slavism to ethnic particularism as is evident in the following quotes made by Karadzic, Garasanin, and Stojanovic⁵ respectively; "All and everywhere are Serbs", "Holy historical right..." and "Till our irradiation or yours".

Serbia's aim was to establish itself as the dominant power in the Balkans thus reducing the apparent menace from alleged rivals. However, Serbia had numerous obstacles in its path to Balkan supremacy that deviated it away from single-mindedness; the key to Serb dominance lay with the creation of Yugoslavia. As Moljevic⁶ said, "The Serbs, who were the first on the Balkans to resist the invasion of the Germans...have thereby acquired the right of leadership of the Balkans, and they will impress this right, both because of themselves, and because of the Balkans and its destiny. They have to fulfil their historical mission, and they will be able to do so only if they have gathered in a homogenous Serbia in the frame of Yugoslavia, into which they will instil their spirit and onto which they will impress their stamp. The Serbs have to possess hegemony in the Balkans, and for having a hegemony in the Balkans they previously must have hegemony in Yugoslavia..."

However, the dream of Serbian dominance within the established frame was not being fulfilled due to the inherent nature of this framework. Cosic⁷ said, "Serbs were created by non-Serbs indicating the Serb belief that they had been forced into adopting their stance by the unfairness of the other Republics and the Yugoslav ideal..." The obstacles to the drive for superiority and the Serbian ideal meant a shift in politics; Yugoslav nationalism became ethnic nationalism. Serbian identity had been tarnished by Yugoslav politics. Kosovo and Vojvodina had gained autonomy under the Communists and the other Republics had checked Serbian dominance. The Serbian politicians looked in a new direction to relieve itself from this failing and undermining partnership. Morris⁸ said, "To put it cynically, one could say that nothing helps a leader like a

⁵ Malcolm "Bosnia: a short history" Macmillan 1996

⁶ Malcolm "Bosnia: a short history" Macmillan 1996

⁷ Politika Jan 10 and Jul 27 1991

⁸ Schopflin "Politics in Eastern Europe" Blackwell 1994

good war. It gives him his only chance of being tyrannical and being loved for it at the same time. He can introduce the most ruthless forms of control and send thousands of his followers to their deaths and still be hailed as a great protector..." Inside Yugoslavia Serbia thought it could realise its potential, in reality the framework prevented this realisation. Without the power of the Serbian Republic Yugoslavia was inadequate and without Yugoslavia Serbia had the chance to re-establish its goal of Balkan domination.

Croatia

Croatia was always unsure of itself within the Yugoslav framework. It was the conflict and struggle for power between the Croats and the Serbs that led both to the downfall of the Federation and the bloodshed in Bosnia. Croatia was different to Serbia; since 1526 it had been part of Hungary. Autonomy was gained in 1867 yet the Croats always remained loyal to their roots.

Three different themes directed Croatian politics: -

- Greater Croatia- the Party of Right and later the Party of Pure Right wanted autonomy for Croatia, Slovenia, and Dalmatia, and the inclusion of Bosnia into the new region.
- Union of Slavs- during the Habsburg wars with the Ottomans the Hungarians imported many Serbs into Croatia to defend the territory. Whilst the two sides were split over Bosnia they agreed with Masaryk over a Yugoslav union.
- Union in Greater Serbia- not popular with the Croats themselves yet became an issue due to the large Serbian population in Croatia.

Serbia was always regarded as different, as external, as making claims upon Croatian soil. This mistrust was furthered by the Croatian Constitution⁹ which stated "...the national state of the Croatian people and the state of other national minorities who are her citizens..." animosity increased when the Constitution removed the rights of the Serbs in the Croatian move to independence.

The Croatian move towards sovereignty also had a nationalistic element as was reinforced with the re-emergence of the Utasa movement highlighted. It was this constant advance of nationalism on both sides that represented the struggle for power within the Yugoslav frame. Croatia's attempt to uncover a national identity within Yugoslavia after years of repression and domination failed. This failure led to the political decision to establish a distinct Croatian.

Bosnia and the other Republics

The other Republics became bit players and pawns in the power struggle between Croatia and Serbia. Slovenia took the opportunity and had the resources to escape and thrive outside the Federation. It also benefited from the lack of a historical claim from one of its larger neighbours. Yet, the other Republics found themselves the location for the expression of the Nationalist claims with Bosnia the centre stage.

Bosnia had gained enormously from years of Habsburg rule and had become politically modern. However the ethnic diversity and territorial history of Bosnia was to become the Republics downfall. The Republic of three nations was torn apart by the claims and greed of Bosnia's larger neighbours using Nationalism to tear apart the fabric of community that had thrived during the fifty years of Yugoslav existence.

⁹ Keesing "Cultural Anthropology" Harcourt Brace 1994

Internationalism

The United Nations charter stresses the right of peoples to self-determination yet the guidelines to this are unclear. This ambiguity is creating even more conflict. Gurr¹⁰ believes that there are five traits in defining a people, "...language and or dialect; social customs; religious beliefs; physical appearance; region of residence..." Yet this simplification ignores claim and counter claim. In Yugoslavia there were many peoples who were attempting to find an identity, gain autonomy or rejoin their homeland; Vojvodina and Kosovo were two such cases. The Central Government in 1971 gave both these regions autonomy for one simple reason- to check Serb the power of the Serbian Republic. Yet how small do you go and for what reasons? Fragmentation is not the answer to keeping a multiethnic federation united. The Communist followed the line that Pesic¹¹ called, "Yugoslavia as a supranational ideology..." However, the Communist leadership was attempting to balance the power within the Federation yet it was guilty of ignoring the issues of identity and history. These issues re-emerged within the Republics and autonomous regions with the fall of the Federation.

The state lacked an overarching identity; it lacked something for people to belong to. The leadership failed to establish a national identity for the Federation. The constant battle to counter the domination of the Federation by one single Republic meant that the Communists had lost the battle for Nationalism and Internationalism; they had failed to unite the Republics in any way either through the people, the economies, or cultures. Ultimately Tito and those that followed after were simply patching over the cracks in the framework. Mismanagement and internal rivalries eradicated any bonds that united the Yugoslav nation.

¹⁰ Peaceworks No.8 Apr 1996

¹¹ Peaceworks No.8 Apr 1996

Factors that Hindered the Creation of Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia was born after the First World War a product of the peace negotiations in an attempt to police the tinderbox of Europe. This attempt by the Great Powers to prevent both war and its causes followed a macro-political agenda that would ignore the needs of the people and the area.

With the only experience of self-rule Serbia automatically seized the reins. This movement automatically set Serbia on a collision course with Croatia that had joined in an attempt to gain more freedom than when it was under the rule of the Dual Monarchy.

The Republics were indeed different. Croatia and Bosnia still had a noble elite with a neo-feudal system; Serbia with the dominance of the Orthodox Church offered a more strict and firm backdrop to the virgin state.

The Post Second World War era saw the implementation of Communism and the installation of Tito's own version of Stalinism. The split in 1941 was along National lines and it was this that the Communists set out to mend, although they only achieved to exaggerate and exploit the differences.

The federal aspect of the state allowed each republic to experience power. This taste of power ensured that the future of Yugoslavia would be a bloody one as the smaller states strived to keep hold of what they had and the larger states attempted to gain more. As Crampton¹ points out, "...the Muslims were trapped into keeping a hold of the Yugoslav nurse for fear of something else..." Yugoslavia offered economic and security possibilities that the Republics needed, it also offered the larger Republics a wider platform. It was this uncertain balance that ensured the Yugoslavian state would never be cohesive.

However, Yugoslavia ignored the ethnic and historical divisions of the area, it was a creation of idealist intellectuals and Western influence. The Communists belief that Nationalism as a stage would pass just as Marx had envisaged capitalism ensured that these issues were not adequately confronted. Yet the people were not Yugoslav and had no reason to believe any different, they were Croat, Slovene or Serb. The success and image to breed the unity was lacking. It was the ambiguity over what a Yugoslavian was or what Yugoslavia stood for that allowed the ethnic identity to remain and eventually be exploited.

¹ Crampton "Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century" Routledge

Conclusion

It was the attraction of power combined with an incoherent Yugoslav identity that ultimately led to the failure of the South Slav ideal. Towards the end of Yugoslavia those in power were blatantly following a nationalistic line that stemmed from their own Republics rather than form a Yugoslav nationality. Yugoslavism allowed for nothing less; power is a numbers game, if you want it you need to be a majority. Even when Communism remained the official line the leaders nationalism was used to maximise the position. Yugoslavia could not deliver. The alternative stemmed from history and identity.

Yugoslavia lacked the fertile soil on which to sow the seeds of unity. Other identities already existed and Yugoslavia lacked, was reluctant, or prevented from using, the means to create that 'supranational' national identity. That is not to say that there could not have been a form of unity in the Balkans but the essence of Balkan politics meant that the state was reactive rather than proactive. The bond of languages, the need for security and economic need could have created a loose federation. Yet, the framework of Yugoslavia provided an arena for regional one-upmanship and self-preservation. The case of Yugoslavia perhaps raises numerous issues that the coalition in Iraq should factor into the reconstruction; Yugoslavia was not a naturally cohesive state founded upon macro politics and only held together by a strong leader with force as backing. The bloody disintegration of the state indicates the necessity for the need for the people to decide their own future. Yugoslavia was a mistake, without Yugoslavia there would not have been a Bosnia or Kosovo, yet did it save us from something else? The answer being that we will never know but it should have been for the people of Yugoslavia to decide.

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