

Yugoslavia as History

Twice there was a country

Second edition

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

1st edition © Cambridge University Press 1996
2nd edition © Cambridge University Press 2000

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First published 1996
Second edition 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface 10/12pt Plantin [GC]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

ISBN 0 521 77357 1 hardback
ISBN 0 521 77401 2 paperback

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Introduction. The search for viability

The avowedly Yugoslav director, Emir Kusturica, originally intended to call his controversial film commemorating the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia “Once There Was a Country,” or *Bila jednom jedna zemlja*. His producers, perhaps with an eye to the Cannes Film Festival where it won a Golden Palm in 1995, later abandoned the title of the novel on which the film is based and chose the more marketable and more literal, “Underground.” Indeed, the bitterly powerful plot takes us through the half century from 1941 to 1991 in the company of Communist Partisans whose corrupt leader keeps them underground for decades after the Second World War. They stay in a cave underneath the old Belgrade fortress, believing that the Fascists have not been defeated and the war rages on above them. When the leader’s scheme finally collapses in the 1960s, he blows up the cave but fails to kill them all. Only with the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the warfare of the early 1990s can the last survivors take their revenge on him.

The title of Dušan Kovačević’s novel avoids the allegorical inference that Tito kept Yugoslavia’s population “underground,” or uninformed about the outside world until his death in 1980. In addition, the plaintive, almost Arthurian original may alternatively be translated as “Once There Was One Country,” reminding us immediately that separate if similar parts were put together. The origins and trials of Yugoslav political unification preoccupy this volume. The First World War gave birth to one Yugoslavia that the Second World War destroyed. That same war then created quite a different sort of Yugoslavia.

The subtitle for this book, “Twice there was a country,” sounds less plaintive and also reminds us that a first Yugoslavia, 1918–41, preceded the second, 1945–91. Neither deserves idealization as some latter-day Camelot, beyond even the “Yugo-nostalgia” of some former citizens. But damnation as a dictatorship, first royal and then Communist, is also undeserved. The following chapters suggest that these two multi-ethnic states had strengths as well as weaknesses. Both struggled to achieve a viability that eluded them in the end.

The bloody end of the second Yugoslavia tempts Western observers to trace the struggles of these South Slav, that is, Yugoslav, peoples and states backward from the present impasse. But going forward into the past makes for bad history. The recent wars of Yugoslav succession, surgically separating Slovenia but bloodying first Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and then Kosovo and Serbia, have surely made it more difficult for the participants themselves to detach their own history from the past decade. Beginning in the late 1980s, politically manipulated media encouraged Serbs and Croats, the two largest ethnic groups, to think of the other's present intentions as biologically driven by exclusivist, nineteenth-century nationalism and a disposition to repeat the crimes of the two world wars. Too many Serbs saw Bosnian Muslims, the former republic's largest ethnic group, as Turks or Slavic turncoats ready to resume the Ottoman Empire's exploitation of the Serb peasantry with conversion to Islam the only escape. Thus did the respective leaders and media make the others' present populations into "imagined adversaries."¹ They also encouraged foreign observers to assume the revival of old alliances – Serbs with Russians, Bosnian Muslims with Turks, and Croats with Germans – whose historical dimensions all sides have since wildly inflated. The shock of the recent wars and the disruption of everyday life still make the present hard for the survivors to comprehend without falling back on selective historical memory and false analogies. The most heroic character in Kusturica's film is a prisoner of memory and analogy. All the more reason for this volume to track with as much detachment as possible the converging, separate, and ambiguous currents that challenged both Yugoslavias.

Unlike the Nazi destruction of the first Yugoslavia in 1941, the collapse of the second fifty years later came as a shock to the Western world. Most observers had given Yugoslavia's viability the benefit of the doubt since Tito's regime had survived the split with Stalin and the Soviet bloc in 1948. Its widely advertised devolution of economic power to self-managed enterprises and their workers' councils won further respect. Tito's diplomacy balanced artfully between East and West and made Yugoslavia a founder and the only European member of the Non-Aligned Movement. By the 1970s, Tito was an aging Communist leader who, like counterparts in the Soviet bloc, kept too much of the central government's reputation bound up in his own personal authority. Still, open borders and perceptibly higher standards of consumption set Yugoslavia apart from the best of the Soviet bloc. European and American tourists flocked to the Adriatic coast, and over 1 million Yugoslavs, from guest workers to professionals, were employed or studying in the West. Academic exchanges opened many doors. Easy access,

a dramatic past, and an innovative present attracted more Western scholars and study than any Communist country save the Soviet Union. In 1961, Ivo Andrić won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and Miroslav Krleža was also a candidate. Western readers rightly saw Andrić's work as Yugoslav rather than ideologically socialist or ethnically nationalist while Krleža's credentials made him a forerunner of the East, really Central European dissidents of the 1980s.²

Contrary to the expectations of émigré opponents, no tremors portending disintegration followed Tito's death in 1980. The successful staging of the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo and the ongoing achievements of Yugoslavia's athletes, authors, and film directors told the outside world that all was still well. Had not the population continued to rise, to 23 million, and the proportion calling themselves Yugoslavs climbed past 5 percent in the 1981 census? In any case, especially for Americans, a federation seemed the appropriate framework for a multi-ethnic state to address its problems.

The two penultimate chapters of this book detail the deadly problems that did accumulate by the end of the 1980s. Unemployment rose past 15 percent and inflation accelerated toward 3,000 percent in 1989. Open ethnic disputes exploded in Kosovo and at least surfaced in Bosnia, just as the sort of dissent already challenging Soviet bloc regimes spread from Slovenia. Meanwhile, Slobodan Milošević tried to step into the vacuum left in the country's Communist leadership by Tito's death, but succeeded outside of his Serbian base only in alienating the non-Serb public and their political élites. When Slovenia's own Communist leadership joined local dissidents in rejecting a crudely recentralized Yugoslavia just as Communist power collapsed across the Soviet bloc, dissolution followed. Then came the essentially ethnic wars which dominate a final chapter on the successor states.

In the words of one Belgrade historian, "Yugoslavia began and ended with Slovenia." The leading Slovenian politician of the first Yugoslavia, Monsignor Anton Korošec, argued that "even a bad Yugoslavia is better than no Yugoslavia." Tito's Slovenian ideologue, Edvard Kardelj, had crafted the second Yugoslavia's federal structure in part to preclude the large Croatian and Serbian territories that the realignment of internal borders in 1939 had promised. Without Slovenia to create a broader balance beyond that between Serbs and Croats, the second Yugoslavia's framework of six federal republics and two autonomous provinces could not easily survive. Serbs constituted significant minorities in Croatia as well as in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo province. The ethnic politics that Milošević had launched in Serbia to save Communist power now came back to threaten, or seem to threaten, those

minorities. Imprisoned by history, although no more than was Croatia's new anti-Communist leadership, Serb elements were persuaded to force their way out of the hastily recognized new states of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1991–92. (The latter's Bosnian Muslim leadership reverted to the German spelling of Hercegovina so as to emphasize the break with a Serbo-Croatian identity.) Macedonia also declared its independence. Montenegro stayed with a Serbia that now included the previously autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina in a rump federation. The second Yugoslavia ceased to exist.

The idea of an inevitable Yugoslavia

Inside and outside what is now the “former Yugoslavia,” its costly demise has not surprisingly given new life to the notion that its creation was a mistake from the start. Many insiders now call the country that survived for seventy years in two incarnations an artificial creature whose deformities made collapse inevitable. A Serbian version sees the first Yugoslavia as a burden imposed by the powers at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 on their wartime ally Serbia and the second as one imposed by the Croatian Communist Tito and an anti-Serbian Soviet Union. A Croatian version cites the disintegration of Yugoslavia as final proof that the Paris peace treaties erred in helping create the first Yugoslavia after the First World War. If the principle of ethnic self-determination introduced by US President Woodrow Wilson justified the dissolution of the multi-ethnic Habsburg monarchy, how could it accommodate another one in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, as the first Yugoslavia was christened? Among the outsiders, some Habsburg historians are attracted to this view. Many Western journalists and politicians unfamiliar with Balkan history have jumped at a more questionable notion, the region's “age-old antagonisms.” If primordial hatreds had set Serbs, Croats, and Muslims at each other's throats from the Ottoman conquest forward, they offered both a simple explanation for the recent Yugoslav tragedy and a ready rationale for avoiding any significant involvement.

How different these views sound than the general consensus about Yugoslavia that had prevailed since the 1950s. Most scholars who enlisted in the Western army of Yugoslav specialists, the present author included, simply assumed that the country would and should continue to exist. Officially approved historians of Tito's Yugoslavia went a step further. They called the very creation of their kind of Yugoslavia inevitable. Drawn like many Marxist scholars to the idea of inevitable historical processes at work, they sought like their Soviet counterparts to

explain how longer-term forces, and not just the fortunes of war, brought them to power. Instead of reading the origins of industrial capitalism in their lands back to the earliest possible moment, however, they gave pride of place to the inevitable convergence of the South Slavic ethnic groups that Yugoslavia brought together. Each of the six federal republics – Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro – had its own history, separate from the others, but to seek any political or economic preeminence from the distinctions was to succumb to “bourgeois nationalism.” This tendency was the fatal flaw, rather than “capitalist exploitation,” that supposedly undid the first Yugoslavia. Its authoritarian evolution and Great Serb impositions on other ethnic groups were blamed primarily on the Belgrade bourgeoisie, with their counterparts in Zagreb sometimes named as accomplices. In return official Serbian historians could divide the responsibility for the war crimes of the Second World War between the Germans (rarely referred to as Nazis) and the fascist regime of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). For all Yugoslav historiography, the Serb Chetnik formations could then be held accountable only for their opposition to the Communist Partisans and their collaboration with the Nazi invaders exaggerated. As in the Soviet Union, younger, more able historians avoided the interwar and postwar periods.

A project to write the history of Yugoslavia in a single volume soon put this consensus under pressure. A four-volume effort of the 1950s had already failed to get beyond the first two for the less controversial period before 1800. The new work was begun in 1966 at the height of liberal reform. But Vladimir Dedijer, et al., *A Short History of Yugoslavia* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974) was not completed in Serbo-Croatian until 1972. By then Tito had brought the liberal era and its emphasis on political tolerance to an end. The volume’s Serb and Montenegrin authorship might have created less controversy if the two authors of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century chapters had not suggested that forces other than foreign domination and bourgeois exploitation stood in the way of unification. The respected Sarajevo historian, Milorad Ekmečić argued that religion, specifically the policies of the Croatian Catholic church, had constituted a serious obstacle to the unification and secular modernization that should otherwise have followed more successfully from a common Serbo-Croatian language. Dedijer was a restless journalist turned historian, after earning renown as Tito’s wartime colleague and biographer. His chapters highlighted Croatian crimes against Serbs in both world wars. His case against the Serbian and Croatian bourgeoisies as the bane of interwar Yugoslavia was too sketchy to be convincing. By 1979 Serbian historian Momčilo

Zečević was able to open a country-wide conference on the initial unification after the First World War by criticizing the ideological consensus around the Yugoslav idea.³

The postwar evolution of Yugoslav scholarship about Yugoslavia should not detain us further. Stevan Pavlowitch and Ivo Banac have provided prudent guides, from somewhat different points of view, through the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ The collapsing consensus on an inevitable Yugoslavia did permit more forthcoming and accurate accounts of the world wars and interwar period, first from Croatian and then from Serbian and other Yugoslav historians. Without these historians, as footnotes will attest, this volume could not have been written.

None of them would have the political impact of three works written primarily for polemical purposes during the 1980s. Numerous Western accounts of the country's collapse cite the publication, if not the exact content, of the 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences. It protested the abuses that postwar Serbia had supposedly suffered in Yugoslavia in general and Serbs in Kosovo province in particular, thus providing ammunition for Milošević's nationalist campaign. Less publicized in the West were the forbidden but still circulated writings of Franjo Tuđman, the future president of Croatia, cataloguing the injustices that he saw inflicted on Croatia since the First World War, while from Belgrade, Vojislav Koštunica and Kosta Čavoški wrote a volume decrying the way that a Communist political monopoly was imposed on postwar Serbia.⁵ In different ways, all three questioned the legitimacy of Tito's Yugoslavia and played a part in its disintegration. But they also posed the question of whether any single Yugoslavia was a legitimate state and by implication raised the prospect of inevitable dissolution.

The search for a viable Yugoslavia

The chapters that follow suspect all inevitabilities. They acknowledge the separate cultural legacies and literatures of these largely related peoples, but neglect their distinctive substance. These brief pages concentrate instead on how these peoples mixed and migrated across proximate lands, and where they intersected with one another – politically, economically, and also culturally – before and during their unification twice in this century. More specifically, who were they historically and who were their leaders? Tito's individual identity counted; others' did too. What structures and ideas drew them together or divided them? By structures, we mean first the stuff of state-building, that is, political culture and legal framework more than ethnic distinctions. We also focus on socio-economic or religious institutions more than class relations

and on warfare or other dealings with near neighbors more than with distant powers. The former were generally more important than the latter, supporting the thesis of a leading western scholar of nationalism that the three forces crucial to coalescing ethnic identity into enduring national consciousness have been state-building experience, religious organization and military mobilization.⁶ All three forces played their parts, perhaps more than socio-economic structures, in bringing both Yugoslavias together and in breaking them both apart.

By ideas, we mean first the romantic rationales for a new South Slav state that emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They confronted a slowly declining Ottoman Empire and a slowly modernizing Habsburg monarchy before 1914. Prior to the nineteenth century, these two empires had divided almost the entire sparsely populated territory between them for nearly 300 years. By the end of the nineteenth century native populations were growing as the imperial hold on them weakened or shifted its ground. The shared imperial legacy of corporate privileges for ethnic groups rather than individual rights, common as well among early modern European states, would none the less leave permanent marks on native aspirations for independence.⁷ Then the First World War swept both empires away. The army of already independent Serbia was essential to the formation of the first Yugoslavia, as were Tito's Partisans to the creation of the second. Still, ideas mattered both times. Andrew Wachtel's persuasive study of the Yugoslav idea finds the interwar state seeking to create a single synthetic South Slav culture, much as the postwar Communist regime relied on a unifying ideology.⁸ Both states also drank of the romantic notion that Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were the organic stuff of one nation.

Forming the second Yugoslavia seemed initially to pose fewer complications than the first. The Partisan cause brought together people from all the constituent ethnic groups, although precious few Albanians and Hungarians, to fight on the winning side. Its Communist leadership could thereby proclaim a supra-national, Soviet-style federation under the party's central control. But when the republics received or wrested significant authority from the center, the balance of power across the federation became a crucial issue. Back came the claims and counterclaims that had competed across the interwar period in the first Yugoslavia.

Two practical motives and the promise of external security also favored a single Yugoslavia. They were the same set that succeeded for Western Europe after the Second World War in building the institutional structures needed to realize them. One was the desire for representative government. Surely one could draw some acceptable balance, federal or

otherwise, between the provincial parts and the capital city. Between 1921 and 1974, no less than six constitutions and one confederal agreement (in 1939) sought to draw that balance between Belgrade and the rest of Yugoslavia. The second was the attraction of economic integration. It promised a larger internal market and greater comparative advantage in the international trade that revived briefly in the 1920s, but boomed from 1950 to 1980. In addition, as NATO did for Western Europe *vis-à-vis* the Soviet bloc, a single state also afforded Yugoslavia's parts more secure relations with the seven potentially hostile neighbors that ringed its borders after the two world wars.

All three of these state-building motives – political, economic, and military – played their part in promoting the viability of both “really existing” Yugoslavias. Struggling with them for predominance throughout were three romantic nineteenth-century ideas for the creation of a unitary nation-state – Great Serbia, Great Croatia, and a Yugoslavia founded on the assumption that at least Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were one ethnic group. Any nation-state, it was assumed before 1914, had the potential to assimilate smaller ethnic groups, not by force but by the attraction of the successful European-style modernization that was supposed to follow from political unification. The nation-state's new high culture, secular and open to an increasingly educated population, would assimilate all in its path. Such was in fact the case, Eugen Weber has argued, for nineteenth-century France.⁹ Pre-1914 Serbia appeared to start down the same track. Yet it would scarcely be easy for a single state to accommodate three national ideas. The first Yugoslavia sought such a synthesis, the second to rise above it. A larger, multiethnic Yugoslav state would need and never sufficiently find the sense of common citizenship and individual responsibility overriding even the majority's ethnic origin that Rogers Brubaker has called the real distinction of pre-1914 France.¹⁰

The everyday interaction of peoples nonetheless cut into their ethnic segregation for much of the history of the two Yugoslavias. To the extent that it did, the experience of a common state held the upper hand over any of the three romantic conceptions of a nation-state. Where it did not, the viability of Yugoslavia was threatened. Two external shocks were still needed to make that threat lethal – the Second World War and the contagious failure in 1989 of the postwar Communist regimes.