

THE MEANING OF YUGOSLAV HISTORY¹

Sabrina P. Ramet

The announcement in early June 2006 that Montenegro was ending its 87½-year union with Serbia and restoring its independence and the subsequent declaration of independence by Kosovo in February 2008 may not be the end of the story of Yugoslav disintegration, since there has been constant drum-beating about possible secession from Bosnia-Herzegovina on the part of the Republika Srpska. In addition, the continued insistence by Serbia that Kosovo's independence is "illegal" (under the Serbian constitution) serves as a reminder that the aftershocks of the fateful War of Yugoslav Succession continue, and once again raises the question of the meaning of the history of the now-defunct Yugoslav state.

Many observers look at the history of the three Yugoslavias and, on seeing both expressions of nationalist resentment and fear on the one hand and the dysfunctionality of Yugoslav institutions of state on the other hand, have concluded that the former was the cause of the latter. In its crudest form, this is the notion (to call it a "theory" would be to employ too grand a term) that the region is riddled with "ancient hatreds," and since the ancient world is conventionally seen as having ended with the fall of Rome in 476, this would require that we believe that the various groups were fighting each other already before they were living in the Balkans and before they were either Christians or Muslims—indeed, at a time when all of them worshipped a multiplicity of deities. The absurdity of rhetoric about ancient hatreds has been pointed out by many observers.

In a more sophisticated version of this line of thinking, which gives up the "ancient" hook, we are asked to believe that there is an ineluctable clash of civilizations, pitting the Christian world against the Islamic world. Like the ancient hatreds notion, the "clash of civilizations" thesis tells us that the specifics of what people in the area argue about (whether unequal taxation or discrimination in hiring or bullying or vandalism) is all irrelevant, since these people allegedly will distrust each other even in the absence of any apples of discord. To the best of my knowledge, there is no scholar specializing in Yugoslav or post-Yugoslav affairs who subscribes to the ancient hatreds school of thought in either of these variants.

¹ This text is a summary of the main ideas found in her *The Three Yugoslavias: State-building and Legitimation, 1918–2005* (The Wilson Center Press & Indiana University Press, 2006), which was published in Croatian translation as *Tri Jugoslavije: Izgradnja države i izazov legitimacije, 1918.—2005*, trans. Vesna Racković and Mirjana Valent (Zagreb: Golden Marketing tehnička knjiga, 2009).

An alternative (but similarly misguided) approach is to construe these two facts (expressions of nationalist resentment and dysfunctional institutions) as unrelated. This approach became popular among some journalists who grew out of the “ancient hatreds” illusion and decided that it was best to treat Yugoslavia as a confusing chaos with lots of problems—and, to summarize this way of thinking, who knows where these problems came from?

There is, however, a third possible approach, which has strong advantages, and that is to treat the dysfunctional institutions together with unjust laws, corruption, and outright illegal operations as responsible for turning such low-level frictions as are natural among humans into much more dangerous energies. In other words, it is not nationalism which made the system dysfunctional, but rather the dysfunctional system which provoked the negative forms of nationalism which have been characteristic of the region. And not just in one of the three Yugoslavias, but in all three.

But systems do not create themselves, laws do not spring out of the ground, and policies do not take shape out of thin air. All of these must be traced to human agency, so that Yugoslav history may be understood, in part at least, as a historical “who-dunnit.” This does not mean that everything which happens is intended by one or another party, but it does mean that the world of politics, including the difference between a legitimate system and an illegitimate one, the existence of forms of injustice in a system, and structural flaws are the result of what people do, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly. There is no such thing as a structural problem in a political system for which no one bears any conceivable responsibility.

Although one should not expect that identifying those responsible is straightforward or uncontested, we can at least agree on a list of ‘the usual suspects’. For example, in turning to the interwar kingdom, noting how the effort to create a constitutional monarchy/parliamentary system ended with the proclamation of the 6th of January dictatorship in 1929, we may certainly agree that the “usual suspects” would include the ruling elites (for the most part centered in Belgrade), and certainly King Aleksandar, Nikola Pašić, and Stjepan Radić, and perhaps also Ljubomir Davidović, and Svetozar Pribićević, although some people may want to add other names to the list. But Serbs of a nationalist orientation, for example, are likely to highlight the allegedly negative part played by Radić and the alleged “trouble-making” by the Albanians of Kosovo, while the Albanians will note that they were forcibly incorporated, against their will, into the kingdom in open defiance of Woodrow Wilson’s principle of national self-determination, while most, if not all, Croats and Slovenes will stress the culpability of the ruling elite in Serbia, among whom King Aleksandar was predominant in the years up to his assassination in 1934. It might even be

possible to find persons ready to accuse Muslim leader Mehmed Spaho or Slovenian clerical leader Anton Korošec or other persons of making their contribution. (In the case of Spaho, for example, it may be recalled that he made possible the passage of the Vidovdan constitution of 1921 by committing his party's support in exchange for some concessions, such as a promise that Bosnia-Herzegovina would remain an administrative unit within the borders it had inherited from the Habsburg years and the autonomy of the Shari'at courts in Bosnia; the Croatian Peasant Party felt, by contrast, that that constitution was unacceptable.)

But we must distinguish among (at least) three kinds of negative actions. To begin with, there are decisions taken under pressure and in conditions where the alternative seemed to be worse. Here one may recall that the newborn State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, representing South Slavic areas that had been under the Habsburg state, sent a delegation to Belgrade in November 1918, instructing the delegation to negotiate for the unification of their state with the Kingdom of Serbia on the basis of federalism. However, by mid-November, the Italian army was pushing into Istria, had entered Rijeka (Fiume), and threatened other parts of Dalmatia. The delegation knew that the Serbian army could face down the Italians and feared that delay would result in the permanent loss of Croatian territory to Italy. The delegation therefore acted beyond its mandate and agreed to conditions of union that would remain a sore point for Croats until the Sporazum of 1939 (and, for the radical right fringe in Croatia, even after that). A rival narrative holds that Crown Prince Aleksandar, acting as regent for the ailing king, simply forced the helpless Croatian and Slovenian delegates to bow to his will, though this rival narrative paints a very unflattering portrait of the delegates from the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. Either way, the unification was rammed through in great haste and with no real discussion or negotiation. Thus was born the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in October 1929.

Then there were outright illegal organizations such as Pribičević's ORJUNA, the more extreme Serb group SRNAO, the Croatian group HANAO, IMRO (a Macedonian resistance group), two formations of Chetniks, and the Ustaša, all of which operated in interwar Yugoslavia as militant nationalist organizations (ORJUNA and the Chetniks with the King's blessing) and all of which used terror and violence to intimidate. There was also a Muslim terrorist group operating in Yugoslavia. The result was that the kingdom was characterized by a level of lawlessness and violence incompatible with the operations of a legitimate state. Indeed, in Croatia, Vladko Maček, the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) leader after the 1928 assassination of Stjepan Radić, felt that it was necessary to respond to the threat posed, albeit in different ways, by Chetniks and Ustaša alike—and, if one believes his pleadings to the government, also by the

communists—by creating armed and uniformed militias in Croatian villages, known as the Croatian Peasant Defense.

Finally, there were policy solutions adopted in accordance with the law, which nonetheless provoked deep resentments among certain groups: Slovenes and Croats, for example, resented the fact that the tax rate in their regions was tangibly higher than in any other regions of the kingdom for the first decade of that state's existence; the Albanians of Kosovo resented the very fact that their land had been forcibly annexed to Serbia on the justification that the medieval Serbian kingdom had had its "heart" there and most certainly resented the forcible confiscation of some of their lands and their assignment to Serb "colonists"; Macedonians resented the fact that their children were being Serbianized in the state schools; and Serbs resented both the fact of the Sporazum, which created a large and autonomous Croatian province called the banovina, and the way in which it came about.

Thus, by the time World War II broke out in Europe, the shotgun unification of the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs with the Kingdom of Serbia, the recurrent trials and incarcerations of opposition politicians on trumped up charges, illegal terrorist organizations (and, for that matter, also the pervasive corruption among the political elites), and discriminatory or ill-considered policies of various kinds had stirred up so much resentment that, given the way entire nationality groups felt targeted and injured, interethnic tensions were the inevitable result. Add to this the fact that a parliamentary deputy from the Serbian Radical Party (Puniša Račić) had assassinated HSS leader Radić in 1928 and that a Macedonian terrorist working together with the Croatian Ustaša movement had assassinated King Aleksandar of the Serbian Karadjordjević dynasty in 1934, and it is easy to understand why, when Axis forces bombed and invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941, there were various domestic forces, among them the Ustaša and the Chetniks, who would perpetrate atrocities not only on the battlefield but also against civilian populations.

And yet, if the Germans, Italians, Hungarians, and Bulgarians had not invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941, there would have been no occupation of Slovenia (and accompanying efforts at Germanization), no Independent State of Croatia, no collaborationist government of Milan Nedić in Belgrade, no Italian occupation of Kosovo and attendant expulsions of Serb colonists, no Chetniks collaborating with every other political force in the area at one time or another (except for the Albanian groups and possibly the Hungarian Army of Occupation in Bačka), and the more than one million Yugoslavs (Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Jews, Albanians, and others) who lost their lives either in concentration camps or in church burnings or in village massacres or in combat might have lived out their lives, and, for that matter,

the communists might never have come to power. Again, thus, human agency makes the difference.

Tito, in spite of the tens of thousands of persons he had slaughtered at Bleiburg, Kočevje, and other sites in May–June 1945, had a real chance to build a better, more durable system. His triadic formula included the slogan “brotherhood and unity,” which at least recognized that postwar reconciliation was a task to be undertaken consciously. But it was not until 1966 (with the sacking of Aleksandar Ranković as Minister of Internal Affairs) that the various non-Serbs began to enjoy more autonomy and equality with Serbs. The years 1967–71 have come down as years of “liberal spring.” It was, of course, not liberal democracy, but liberal communism. But in terms of the media, the market, national culture, religious policy, and, in Croatia, linguistic policy, these were indeed years of liberalization. Pessimists might say that Yugoslavia was doomed no matter what it did, so that an itemization of commissions and omissions, sins and errors, becomes irrelevant. This is, however, wrong-headed. There is simply no way that one can reconcile a one-party system with long-term political legitimacy, but a managed deconstruction of the organizational monopoly, combined with economic marketization (in the direction of a social democracy), the depoliticization of the courts and the media, an education for tolerance and mutual respect, and the introduction of a multiparty system would have placed socialist Yugoslavia on a different trajectory. It is still possible that the country might have broken up, but it would have been less likely to sink into internecine warfare.

Instead, however, there were two turning points (among many other problems too numerous to mention) that took the country down the road toward meltdown. The first was the ill-considered purge of the liberals in the early 1970s. In Slovenia, the liberal leadership headed by Stane Kavčič was swept out of power, and replaced by a more conservative coterie led by France Popit. In neighboring Croatia, tens of thousands of party members were expelled from the League of Communists, 741 persons were stripped of their posts and expelled from the party, another 280 party members were compelled to resign their posts, and 131 Croatian functionaries were demoted. Among the Croatian leaders forced out of power were party secretary Miko Tripalo and party president Savka Dabčević-Kučar. Prominent Croatian intellectuals including Vlado Gotovac and Franjo Tuđman were sent to prison. The Croatian cultural society Matica Hrvatska was shut down. And the editors of various wayward publications were replaced. For many Croats, the experience was traumatic and served as fresh proof that Croatia would always remain second-class in Tito’s Yugoslavia; many Croats nurtured deep resentments toward the communist party and toward Belgrade after that, and felt relief only with the election of Tuđman to the Croatian presidency in 1990.

In October 1972, almost a year after the purge of the Croatian liberals, Tito met with the liberal leaders of Serbia, accusing them of insubordination and unsocialist economics. Soon after that meeting, party secretary Latinka Perović and LCS president Marko Nikezić resigned their positions. While Perović and Nikezić had been committed to a program of cooperation with the other republics of Yugoslavia on an egalitarian basis, the new generation of leaders, especially Draža Marković and Petar Stambolić, was marked by some nationalistic tendencies and Marković and Stambolić were, in any event, not accepted as good partners by the other republics. In December 1981, the Central Committee of the LC Serbia met in Belgrade; Marković, then one of the leading figures in the Serbian party, mentioned that Yugoslavia consisted of five “peoples” (*narod*), acknowledging the official status of the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins; however, according to official socialist Yugoslav usage, the “ethnic Muslims” also qualified as a *narod*, and Marković’s omission provoked sharp reactions throughout the country, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina.² In any event, the removal of Perović and Nikezić eliminated the liberal option in Serbia and opened the door to the eventual Serbian national awakening with all of its dire effects.

In the short term, of course, what Tito did in the course of 1971–72 seemed to stabilize the situation, but over the long term, this approach proved to be short-sighted and self-destructive. Indeed, Tim Judah relates how Tito, driving with the influential Slovenian politician Edvard Kardelj sometime in his waning years, mused that civil war was inevitable and reflected that, in the most important task he had faced, he had failed. Indeed, Tito and his comrades committed many errors. Among them we may list the following:

- They failed to transform the system into a legitimate system, which is to say they failed to undertake what Atatürk undertook in Turkey, viz., to build democracy from above, and because legitimacy is the key to functionality, and democracy is the key to legitimacy—this means that they failed to lay the foundation for a functional state;
- They removed, in the course of 1971–73, some of the most popular leaders in Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Serbia, who shared a commitment to reform the system, replacing them with Tito-loyalists whose overriding commitment was personal loyalty to Tito; They instituted regional pluralism in place of democratic

² Raif Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita do smrti Jugoslavije: Svjedočenja* (Sarajevo: Svjedok, 1999), 89, 90–91.

pluralism, allowing local barons in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, etc. to build up local power bases, thus setting the stage for the breakup of the country;

- They “solved” the problem of the Tito succession by instituting a system of frequent and regular rotation of cadres which only contributed further to the weakening of the center;
- And, not finally but only last on my list, they pursued an economic policy based on excessive borrowing, the subsidization of insolvent “political factories,” and the duplication of services along republic lines which drove the economy into a nose-dive by the late 1980s.

Ironically, regional pluralization did not reduce interethnic/interrepublic bickering; on the contrary, it intensified it, by giving national elites institutional resources including media outlets controlled at the republic level, with the result that, by the end of the 1980s, the Serbian media had become the vehicle for poisonous attacks on entire nationality groups with the Croatian media later making some pallid but telling responses, especially in the revival of memories of World War II.

The second turning point came in 1987, when Slobodan Milošević seized power in Serbia through a coup. Branko Mamula, who was then Defense Minister, contacted several republic leaderships (specifically in Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia) as well as some highly placed Serbs (Ljubičić) to see if they were prepared to force Milošević to step down, on the grounds that there were no provisions in the party statutes for the use of internal coups to transfer power.³ But the other leaderships were self-absorbed and distracted; indeed, when I asked Milan Kučan, the president of Slovenia, about this in 1999, he confessed that at that time he had not even grasped the significance of what had happened in Serbia.

But again, it should be emphasized that the socialist system was dysfunctional even before Milošević came to power. To qualify as “fully” functional, a system should embody the principle of rule of law, by which is meant, among other things, that established procedures are respected and laws followed. But, for example, in 1982, the Serbian party refused to accept the results of the 30 June vote, in which Draža Marković had failed to win the required two-thirds of votes in the Central Committee to confirm his appointment (by the Serbian party) to the LCY presidium; instead, after a lot of overheated accusations from the Serbian side, the non-Serbs agreed to an unprecedented second vote and simply caved in to the wishes of the Serbian party. Or again, take the fate of the Kraigher commission, which

³ Branko Mamula, *Shučaj Jugoslavija* (Podgorica: CID, 2000), 115, 118–20.

delivered a report on the economy in April 1982, or the Vlaškalić commission, which delivered a report on the political system in December 1985. In both cases, there was an expectation that the recommendations of these commissions would be put into practice, but in both cases these reports proved to be dead letters. Or again, between June 1986 and June 1988, the SFRY presidency adopted 322 acts and resolutions, but only the few resolutions dealing with military and security affairs were ever put into practice.⁴ Or again, to take a more dramatic case, there is Kosovo, where the purges of administrative, security, military, and professional cadres both in the Stambolić era and in the era of Slobodan Milošević did not respect the letter of the law or established procedures.

The “third Yugoslavia” was, of course, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, proclaimed by Serbia and Montenegro in April 1992. Whether one thinks of the flawed elections or the repression in Kosovo or the dynamics of the Socialist-Radical alliance or the 1998 law on the media or the associated clampdown on the universities, the FRY functioned as a system which did not respect the rights of its own citizens. Under the circumstances, it is no surprise that both Kosovo and Montenegro eventually declared their independence of Serbia.

And, as is well known, it was the ruling circles of Serbia (with Milošević in the seat of power) and the members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art who stoked up the emotions that prepared the way for violence. But when it comes to the preparations, it was, of course, not enough to talk about Tito’s transfer of factories from the low plains of Serbia to the highlands of Croatia and Slovenia at a time when the Yugoslavs feared a Soviet invasion (1948–51). Preparations included the adoption of a new Serbian constitution in September 1990 which gave the Serbian president authority over Serbian armed forces (in effect declaring Serbia’s secession from the SFRY), the clandestine importation of weaponry from the moribund Soviet Union, the illegal confiscation (in spring 1990) of the weaponry of the territorial defense forces of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in part also of Slovenia, the establishment, arming, and training in the course of 1990 of Serb militias in Croatia and Bosnia, the spread of disinformation in Bosnia concerning Serb intentions, the obstruction of defense preparations in Croatia and more particularly Bosnia,⁵ the removal of some of the arms factories in Bosnia to Serbia, and, in late 1991, the emplacement of artillery pieces in positions around and overlooking major cities of Bosnia-Herzegovina, including Sarajevo. Already by March 1991, the JNA had illegally distributed nearly 52,000

⁴ Dizdarević, *Od smrti Tita*, 188–89.

⁵ Sefer Halilović, *Lukava strategija*, 3rd, expanded ed. (Sarajevo: Matica, 1998), 74; and Munir Alibabić-Manja, *Bosna u kandžama KOS-a* (Sarajevo: Behar, 1996), 35.

firearms to Serb volunteer units in Bosnia as well as to various Serb individuals, and had delivered some 23,298 firearms to members of the SDS.⁶ The scale of these preparations is enormous and, in the absence of anything even remotely comparable in Slovenia or Croatia or Bosnia, gives the lie to suggestions that those other republics bear some equivalent responsibility for the outbreak of the War of Yugoslav Succession.

To talk about Yugoslavia today is, thus, inevitably to talk about its failures, to talk about “the War,” to talk about Milošević, to talk about how the past is reflected in the present or, perhaps, how the present generation chooses to remember the past. But there was a time when to talk about the meaning of Yugoslav history would have led one to a discussion of self-management, of the Yugoslav insight into the importance of democracy at the workplace (whether effectively put into practice or not), and perhaps even (recalling David Binder’s 1978 documentary film, *Tito and the Power of Resistance*) of the unique leadership qualities of Josip Broz Tito. At this point in time, however, to reflect on the meaning of Yugoslav history leads one in the direction of reflections on the failure of state-building three times over and on the descent into the most sanguinary European war since the end of World War II. And for an explanation of this result, one must look to the illegitimacy of the socialist system (or, to put it more politely, to the failure of the socialist system to resolve its legitimacy problem), to the economic deterioration which began already in 1974 and which eventually drove many Yugoslavs to the point of desperation, to the role of nationalist intellectuals (such as those who drafted the famous SANU Memorandum and staged weekly meetings at Francuska ulica broj 7 to discuss how Serbs had suffered), and to the Serbian revitalization movement which, as is the case with all such movements, appealed to people by reducing stress in the short run (by offering simplified explanations and big promises), effected radical changes in people’s perception and behavior, and, to use a phrase employed by Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., generated “extreme emotional excitement”⁷ among Serbs (while inducing fear variously among Slovenes, Croats, Hungarians of the Vojvodina, Bosniaks, Macedonians, and the Albanians of Kosovo). But although the sources of the problems and, thus, of the meltdown itself were diverse, the one lesson which I would emphasize above all else is that there is a crucial difference between the capacity of legitimate states and that of illegitimate states to withstand threats generated by ambitious leaders, to survive economic shocks (as

⁶ Jovan Divjak, “The First Phase, 1992–1993: Struggle for Survival and Genesis of the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” in *The War in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1991–1995*, ed. Branka Magaš and Ivo Žanić (London & Portland: Frank Cass, 2001), 154.

⁷ Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., as quoted in John J. Collins, *The Cult Experience: An Overview of Cults, Their Traditions, and Why People Join Them* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1991), 8.

shown by the American example after 1929), and to evolve new political behaviors.