

Breakup of Yugoslavia

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Abstract

This paper details the entire history of Yugoslavia, from its formation after WWI, to its eventual demise. It covers all aspects of the Yugoslavian timeline, giving an in depth look into the origins and outcomes of different ethnic tensions, including both the Ustase-Serbian divide and the Serbian-Muslim divide. It also considers the consequences of the rule of Tito and Milosevic, as well as analyzes the effectiveness of the Dayton Peace Accords. With the use of both thoroughly written records, and several first hand accounts, this paper provides a comprehensive documentation of the history of Yugoslavia.

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Compared to other events of the 20th century, the breakup of Yugoslavia is typically an overlooked topic, despite its scale and significance rivaling that of any other historical event of the time. This paper will chronicle nearly a century of Yugoslavia's dark history, from its creation after WWI, to its current configuration. Ethnic, religious, and regional differences among Yugoslavians, paired with nationalistic and authoritative rulers, led to a slow and violent dissolution of the state, ultimately resulting in several nations with struggling economies and questionably democracies.

The South Slavic people have been inhabitants of the balkans for hundreds of years (Zoë 5). It was the aftermath of WWI, as a way to stop a power-hungry Italy from taking more land in Dalmatia, that resulted in the merger of Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia into one collective entity (Judah). It was another eleven years before it was appropriately renamed Yugoslavia, literally the land of the South Slavs (Zoe 3).

The newly integrated citizens of Yugoslavia seemed to be immediately dissatisfied, a trend that would only grow worse as the nation lived on. The Slovenes believed they were simply trading rule by the Austria-Hungary empire for a new Serbian regime (Judah). Many Albanians in Kosovo were frustrated that they were restricted to Yugoslavia, and were not able to join Albania, another Balkan country that managed to gain its own freedom in 1918. Others, including Macedonian nationalists thought this union was unfair (Judah). The only people who could live happily with this were the Serbians, who had recently won their independence from

the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century and now had their own “empire” populated by an increasing number of Serbians.

Despite the negative feelings harbored by most at that time, things did remain peaceful. It was not until WWII that fighting began to emerge (Judah). With the instability and lack of overall national unity in Yugoslavia, they could not put up a fight against the axis powers. Germany and Italy easily defeated them, dividing their territory as they saw fit, and installing a fascist group called the “Ustaše” into power (Hart). The Roman Catholic, ultranationalist, Croatian Ustaše rivaled the Nazis when it came to killing and violence (Hart), with their targets in Yugoslavia being Serbs and Jews.

It did not take long for before the emergence of underground resistance groups to combat the repression and violence of the Ustaše. The first group, called the Chetniks, led by Draža Mihailović, were a strictly Serbian band who wanted to protect their land and were loyal to the former Yugoslavia (Judah). The second group, led by Josip “Tito” Broz, was a communist movement that valued all ethnicities in the area, with the singular goal of ousting the axis powers and creating a free socialist state (Judah). Although both resistance groups wanted the Axis backed Ustaše gone, the Chetnik’s Serb-nationalism and the Partisans’ communist ideology clashed, leading to conflict even among these groups, resulting in the Chetniks actually collaborating with the Ustaše . Ultimately, the Partisans proved victorious, gaining control of most of Yugoslavia, and forcing the Axis to surrender in 1944. The Partisans then continued to vengefully kill, executing 30,000 Ustaše troops, and many Chetniks, including their leader Mihailović (Hart).

This is the first example of the ignorant and ill-founded violence that continues to manifest itself for reasons as varied as ethnicity, nationality, religion, and politics. Although they were all technically South Slavs, differing ethnicities and nationalities fueled much violence, as evidenced by the Croatian Ustaše against two Serbian groups.¹ Religiously, the Roman Catholic Ustaše targeted Orthodox Serbians, as well as Jews. Political differences were also prevalent, with the communist Partisans fighting against two fascist entities. There were practically no commonalities among the groups in any area, which facilitated fighting and kept them from finding a resolution.

With the Partisan victory at the end of WWII, Tito was able to assume power, creating the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) (Judah). SFRY was composed of six republics: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Montenegro, as well as two provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina (Brunner and Johnson). A fervent communist, Tito originally modeled his republic after the Soviet Union, but after a fallout with Stalin in 1948, Tito championed his own form of Socialism (Judah). He then became a promoter of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (Judah), an organization that stayed away from both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. With international backing, a promise of unity among all ethnicities, and an ever-present authoritarian rule, Tito's regime silenced any ethnic tensions, creating a peaceful, as well as decently livable, environment, that continued until his death in 1980.

Without Tito's strong rule, violence fueled by confusion and ethnic differences erupted once again. Finally, in 1991, both Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence (Brunner and Johnson). Slovenia was able to do so with little fighting because it was 90% ethnically

¹ Although participation in the Partisans changed over time and they had a pan-ethnic vision, it had a mostly Serbian following (Hart).

Slovenian (Brunner and Johnson). Croatia, on the other hand, struggled with gaining freedom, resorting to evicting most of its Serbian population to succeed. Macedonia followed suit, declaring its independence the following year.

The next republic that tried to leave, Bosnia-Herzegovina, proved to be the most savage and uncontrollable, owing to the fact that it was also the most ethnically diverse of the republics. In 1991, a year before the conflict officially started, Bosnia-Herzegovina was 43.7% Muslim, 31.4% Serb, and 17.3% Croat (Burg and Shoup 27). It is from this succession that the term “ethnic cleansing” originates (Morgan-Jones et al). All groups were acting as both aggressors and victims at different points in the Bosnian War, with murder, torture, incarceration, eviction, and rape occurring frequently on all three sides. Some of the worst atrocities occurred at Srebrenica, carried out by Bosnian Serbs (Republika Srpska) on Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) (Morgan-Jones et al). 8,000 Muslim men and boys were murdered, and UN peacekeepers were captured and held as hostages (“Negotiating the Dayton Peace Accords”). This genocide perfectly exemplifies Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic’s “Greater Serbia” ideology. The violence and tactics used by Milosevic echoed the ambitions of Mihailovic and his Chetnik guerillas.

After many failed peace attempts by the EU and UN, as well as powerful threats by the United States (Burg and Shoup 334), the Dayton Peace Accords were signed on December 14th, 1995 by the Presidents of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, finally bringing an end to the Bosnian War (“Negotiating the Dayton Peace Accords”). The Dayton Agreement split Bosnia into two separate and distinct entities: The Muslim-Croat Federation (MCF) and the Republika Srpska (RS) (Burg and Shoup 365-367). The language of the treaty demanded that “The Parties

shall comply with the cessation of hostilities... provide a safe and secure environment for all persons in their respective jurisdictions... [and] cooperate fully with any international personnel”(“Dayton Peace Agreement”). It is impressive how quickly and successfully the Dayton Accords stopped the bloodiest European conflict since WWII, but because nations had to accept the terms reluctantly, it left them all wanting more.

It is clear that history repeats itself, and in this case it managed to happen in the same century. Just like the tripartite struggle that existed during WWII between the Ustaše, Chetniks, and Partisans, there was now one that consisted of the Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, based upon many of the same reasons as before. This time, however, international intervention led to a ceasefire, rather than the war raging on until one party emerged victorious.

Out of the six republics that formed the original Yugoslavia, only two remained by 1995: Serbia and Montenegro. When the former President of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic became the President of The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia² in 1997, he brought along his “Greater Serbia” mentality with him. His extremist rule and strong Serbian nationalism is similar to what would have happened if the Chetniks under Mihailovic came out on top after WWII. For example, Milosevic crushed political dissent from Kosovo, a “highly disputed territory... rich with Serbian history” (Laurent and Melady). In March of 1998, Milosevic sent counter-insurgency troops to quiet the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, and after continually refusing to listen and withdraw his men, Serbia suffered a bombing from NATO a year later (Laurent and Melady). With NATO police now patrolling Kosovo instead of Serbians, the territory was able to gain its independence from Serbia in 2008.

² Not to be confused with The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

After Milosevic's loss in the Kosovo War and the subsequent air raids on Serbia in the late 20th century, things only got worse for him when he lost the 2000 election to opponent Vojislav Kostunica (Brunner and Johnson). After refusing to accept the election results and rioting by one million people in the street, Milosevic decided to officially leave office. The following year he was charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (*Milosevic on Trial*).

His trial at the UN International Criminal Tribunal was an arduous and drawn-out process. Countless eyewitness testimonies were presented as evidence against Milosevic. These were people who were attacked, watched their family die, or forced to obey his cruel orders. They all had sufficient incriminating evidence against Milosevic, along with the damning statistic that over 125,000 were killed during the Bosnian War (*Milosevic on Trial*), and over three million were forced to flee. This did not stop Milosevic from stubbornly cross-examining every piece of evidence and taking frequent breaks due to his failing health.

There was no final verdict to the trial, as Milosevic passed away from a heart attack in 2006. Although it was stated in the verdict of another Serbian politician's case years later that "there was no sufficient evidence presented in this case to find that Slobodan Milosevic agreed with the common plan [to create territories ethnically cleansed of non-Serbs]" (Knezevic), reactions were mixed. Many believed his untimely death exonerated him, while some, especially Serbians, sympathized with the man. It is perhaps Milosevic's Serbian lawyer Dragoslav Ognjanovic who best captured the sentiments of the Serbian people at the time, and what that trial symbolized to them: "It was a war, and it was a campaign against my country, against my people. Not against one regime, against politicians, it was against the people. I'm not defending

only my client, I'm not assisting only to him, I'm assisting to my people" (*Milosevic on Trial*).

Two months after Milosevic's death, Montenegro held a referendum on independence, becoming the final republic to leave Yugoslavia (Brunner and Johnson). Despite Serbia and Montenegro's common orthodox religion, their differences, like Serbia's population of eight million compared to the 650,000 of Montenegro (Judah) proved to be too much. This dissolution was performed democratically and peacefully, unlike those that preceded it. With every republic now an independently functioning country, the Yugoslavia that was home to an amazingly diverse population of people finally ceased to exist.

While Yugoslavia does not officially exist anymore, the countries that were once a part of it still do. This begs the question of what changes the breakup of Yugoslavia actually brought to the involved countries, and what similarities they still have to their former republic. The most significant change that resulted from the dissolution of Yugoslavia is the increased freedom the countries now enjoy. The newly found sovereignty and democracy of these nations is the reason they wanted to break up in the first place. There are multiple parties that the people can choose from through democratic elections, as opposed to one authoritarian ruler under the old Yugoslavian system (Pasic).

Of the six countries that were once part of Yugoslavia, all belong to either the European Union or the United Nations, two of the largest organizations in the world that stand for peace and human rights. To be eligible to join, the European Union states that "Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities" (www.europarl.europa.eu).

The fact that countries like Croatia or Slovenia are now part of such an organization is a testament to how far they have come from the violence that once plagued them.

Membership in the EU or UN is a great first step to becoming better countries, but like other countries that find themselves in these organizations, it does not mean that they are flawless. Many view the political system in these countries as somewhat of an “illusory democracy” that is much different than the kind you would find in most other European countries. There is still corruption that takes place, and the bureaucratic systems remain inefficient. The media is heavily controlled by the government, and there is little civil society (Pasic). There is technically a separation of powers, but few checks and balances leave certain branches overpowered (Pasic). So, while there is democracy in these countries, it remains somewhat restrictive and underdeveloped, which is common for countries that were recently war-torn.

Another commonality of countries that are trying to escape their histories of dictators and warfare, are fledgling economies. After suffering the economic damage that war brings, surviving sanctions, and trying to shift away from their communist roots under Tito, it is not difficult to see why these countries are struggling financially. As of 2015, all six countries have lower GDP than the EU average, and five out of the six³ have higher unemployment rates than the EU average (Miran). While things still remain shaky in these countries, they are doing their best to bounce back, with GDPs that are currently on the rise.

Understanding the enthralling history of Yugoslavia highlights important trends and teaches valuable lessons. Religious differences in Yugoslavia between Catholics, Serbians, and

³ Slovenia is the only one that does not

Jews increased tensions, as did specific regional differences that existed during and after WWII. Both Tito's strong vision of communism and Milosevic's unmatched Serbian nationality made matters worse, because although it united some, it ostracized and angered others. Whether or not the Dayton Accords were the best way to end the fighting, it is clear that things were going to continue if international intervention was not instated. Now, these nations finally live in peace for the time being, striving to get back on track politically and economically, and doing everything in their power to stop violence like this from happening again.

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