



***How did the proponents of the single party
state diffuse ethnic tensions to attain
power in Yugoslavia?*** 

A Historical Investigation

By 

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Part A - Plan of Investigation



Topic:

How did the proponents of the single party state diffuse ethnic tensions to attain power in Yugoslavia?

Method of Investigation:

The investigation will gather and present evidence of the maneuverings of the Communist Party before 1943, of the formative years of Marshall Joseph Tito's regime, and of the national tensions rocking Yugoslavia in those years. The underlying assumptions of the question – that ethnic tension existed, and that the communists under Tito overcame them – will be addressed in order to support a viable answer. All scholarly, historical sources will be considered with respect to purpose, origin, value and limitations, and the two most relevant histories will be evaluated explicitly. This investigation seeks to analyze the conventional view of single-party communism – as a restorer of order, and a “cure” for social strife – from a historiographical perspective.



Scope:

The scope of this investigation spans a 30-year period from the birth of the first Yugoslav State circa 1919 to Tito's falling out with Stalin in 1948. Of course, some earlier references to the history of ethnicity in the Balkans will be necessary.

Part B - Summary of Evidence



Ethnic Politics in Yugoslavia:



- After the First World War, the “Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes” was established at the behest of the Allied Powers. Despite the titular equality of the constituent nations, the new constitution put centralized control in the hands of the Serbian royal dynasty at Belgrade. Frustrated Croatian delegates boycotted the constitutional convention.¹
- Although the opposition members eventually returned to the government, Serbian led majorities in parliament intermittently subverted and suppressed them for years with the sanction of the monarch. After a member of the Serbian-backed Radical Party assassinated five Croatian delegates on the floor of the assembly, King Aleksander dissolved the parliament, repealed the constitution, and banned political parties of any kind.²

Communist Maneuverings:

- The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) came into existence shortly after the creation of the kingdom. After communists achieved electoral victories in local and national parliamentary

¹ Gewehr, Wesley M. *The Rise of Nationalism in the Balkans 1800-1930*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931. 96-107. Print.

² Ramet, Sabrina P. *The Three Yugoslavias*. Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006. 52-57. Print.



ances, the Serbian minister of internal affairs awarded the Communist seats to other parties and outlawed the party itself.³

- Despite government repression, the CPY continued to hold regular conferences. Between 1919 and 1923, the party rejected all “nationalist” approaches to Yugoslav government in its official documents. But, as internal struggles rocked the CPY, more leftist members began to argue that ethnic tensions could be exploited to precipitate a communist revolution. This view became dominant after 1925, when Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin and the Comintern applied increasing pressure on the CPY. In the early thirties, the party made a complete about face, advocating the immediate secession of every ethnic minority in Yugoslavia.⁴
- With the growth of Fascist and National Socialist movements in nearby Italy and Germany, defeatist slogans of “self-determination” were dropped in official party resolutions, and CPY leaders began to call for a “united front” to check the threat of Axis invasion.⁵

The Genesis of Tito

- Although Josip Broz Tito – a Croat-Slovene communist⁶ - rose to power within the CPY before the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, he consolidated his control as the leader of the Partisan resistance during the Axis occupation of World War II.⁷
- While Tito galvanized the resistance, Monarchist officials and nationalist groups (like the right wing Croatian Ustase and the royally backed Serbian Chetniks) were collaborating with German and Italian occupiers. With the Allied Victory, these groups were ousted and discredited.⁸
- As Tito emerged at the head of the new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), he worked carefully to populate the government and military with a diverse mix of ethnicities. In newly liberated Yugoslav towns he established “National Councils of Liberation” – local government bodies staffed with underrepresented social groups, including the poor, the young, and women.⁹
- Tito also began to enforce typical Communist repressions – like forced collectivization, newspaper censorship, and restrictions on the practice of religion. However, these policies were carried with generally less brutality than in the Soviet Bloc.¹⁰

³ (Ramet, 58)

⁴ Shoup, Paul. *Communism and the Yugoslav National Question*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968. 21-42 Print

⁵ (Shoup, 43-49)

⁶ Busky, Donald F. *Communism in History and Theory: The European Experience*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002. 33. Online.

⁷ (Shoup, 63)

⁸ (Ramet, 158)

⁹ Denitch, Bogdan Denis. *The Legitimation of a Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. 45. Print.

¹⁰ (Busky, 34)

- After the war Tito's independent policies eventually led to Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform in 1948, after Tito ignored Stalin's orders to reorganize the CPY.¹¹

Part C -Evaluation of Sources:



Communism and the Yugoslav National Question, by Paul Shoup, and *The Three Yugoslavias*, by Sabrina Ramet, proved to be the two sources most valuable to this investigation. *Communism and the Yugoslav National Question* considers the effects of Communism on Balkan national relations during the formative years of the Socialist Yugoslavia, and *The Three Yugoslavias* examines the legitimacy of the various states that have occupied "Yugoslavia" in the modern era.

Both books originate in university history departments. Paul Shoup (currently a professor emeritus of comparative politics at the University of Virginia) wrote *Communism* in 1968, and Sabrina Ramet wrote *The Three Yugoslavias* between 1996 and 2004, while teaching at the Norwegian University of Science & Technology. Though both books have academic origins, the purposes of the two works differ markedly. *Communism* seeks to appraise communist approaches to nationality, and to examine political strategies for overcoming ethnic conflict. *Three Yugoslavias*, however, sets out to debunk one of *Communism's* assumptions – that the difficulties experienced by Yugoslavs have their roots in ineluctable "ancient hatreds." Instead, Ramet postulates that specific human errors prevented the Yugoslav states from creating "legitimate" regimes, committed to democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Of course, both works have limitations. *Communism* was written in the mid 1960's, only about 25 years after the communist takeover. This limits the book's historical perspective – many of the events Shoup describes had not lost their partisan political relevance by 1968. In *Three Yugoslavias*, Ramet's attempts to disprove conventional wisdom sometimes overshadow the ethnic realities of Yugoslavia. "Human agency" certainly shapes history, but human agents are inevitably influenced by social prejudices.

Despite these limitations, both works offer valuable historical insights. Ramet's book considers Yugoslavia from an original perspective, and gives some historical depth to regional problems that are often written off as mere "ethnic strife." Shoup's offering is the depth of his research – his extensive study of Yugoslav records, and numerous interviews with Yugoslavs who actually witnessed the communist takeover imbue his text with a sense of historical reality that many more modern histories lack. Ramet also relies almost exclusively on original research gleaned from primary documents. In both works, the impeccable sourcing and extensive referencing to firsthand accounts practiced by both authors add value and utility.

¹¹ (Busky, 35)

Part D - Analysis



At the junction of two continents, the Balkan lands have often churned with ethnic discontent. Centuries of imperial intrigue, holy war, and constant resettlement have cultivated almost constant conflict in Southeastern Europe. Yet, in the middle of the 20th century, the South Slavic peoples enjoyed a brief respite from cultural clashes. For approximately 45 years, the communist regime led by Josip Broz Tito maintained a seemingly remarkable degree of social stability in a united Yugoslavia. How did the Yugoslav communists create a stable government? The answer lies in the unique nature of the Yugoslav one-party state. By departing from the Soviet model, Tito and his followers successfully balanced the interests of rival ethnicities with an impartiality that earlier regimes never achieved.

By the time of Tito's ascension to power in 1943, ethnic difficulties had haunted Yugoslavia since its inception. After the 1919 creation of the "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes," regional factions quickly sprang up in Croatia, Montenegro, and Slovenia in opposition to Serbian domination of the government, which was ruled by a Serbian dynasty at Belgrade.¹² Resistance from the Croatian Peasant Party and other groups ultimately prompted King Aleksander to rescind the constitution, ban all political parties, and establish a centralized, Serbian dictatorship in 1929.¹³ This last move cemented a trend that had threatened a unified Yugoslav state from its beginning – the growth of ethnic politics. Even before the crackdown, Yugoslavs engaged politically through ethnic groups. The dictatorship only worsened these problems. Disgruntled nationals now had to resort to covert, violent tactics to pursue their ends. Though some ideological points did separate these factions, they were largely defined by their ethnic identity.

Some historians present communism, in and of itself, as a solution to these sweeping ethnic problems. Yet, in his history of the subject, Shoup soundly refutes such generalizations. His detailed study of the minutes of Yugoslav Communist Party (CPY) meetings reveals that if any group sought to profit from ethnic disputes in pre-war Yugoslavia, it was the communists. Taking its directions from Moscow and the Comintern at that point, the CPY constantly changed positions with the shifting political winds. Although it originally advocated a unitary, Soviet-like state, the CPY began to clamor for "self-determination" of nationalities as Croatian resistance to the monarchy mounted.¹⁴ As fascist influence expanded in the 1930s, the Communists once again advocated the centralized model.¹⁵ The CPY worked unceasingly and opportunistically for revolutionary change - particulars of policy, ideology, and consistency were subsidiary to this goal.

Only the events of the Second World War and the emergence of the Tito would empower Yugoslav communism to take control of the "national question." The Axis invasion of Yugoslavia offered the Communist Partisans some unexpected opportunities in the long run. The willingness of existing officials to collaborate with the Fascists, coupled with the growth of fascist movements in Croatian

¹² (Gewehr, 96-107)

¹³ (Ramet, 52-57)

¹⁴ (Shoup, 21-42)

¹⁵ (Shoup, 43-49)

nationalist circles completely discredited both the monarchy and nationalist agitators.¹⁶ Furthermore, the recognition of Tito – a Croat-Slovene by birth¹⁷ – as a liberator placed a truly “Yugoslav” character at the head of the Communist movement. Tito offered the exhausted people of Yugoslavia an easy alternative to instability. The War had already purged his opponents; he simply needed to implement his policies. The creation of “National Committees of Liberation” offered a conspicuous vehicle for transcending ethnic loyalties. These organs of local government were deliberately peopled with women, the poor, and the young to foster loyalty for the Yugoslav regime in underrepresented groups.¹⁸ Government and military posts were also carefully staffed to reflect total population percentages and unify ethnic factions within the apparatus of the state.¹⁹ Tito gained a free hand to make these changes by resisting Soviet domination. His independent policies even resulted in Yugoslavia’s exclusion from the Cominform in 1948.²⁰ Within five years of his ascendancy, Tito had firmly pushed Yugoslavia towards diverse ethnic representation, in contrast to the Russo-centric tendencies of Moscow. Though Yugoslavia was typically communist in many respects – like press censorship, religious suppression, and secret police activity²¹ – the ground had been laid for a unique, ethnically inclusive single-party model.

Part E - Conclusion

Tito and his Partisans authored a new chapter in the Yugoslav story. They overcame the raucous ethnic politics of Kingdom of Yugoslavia with a new approach to the multinational state. Rejecting earlier platforms of the CPY, the architects of the SFRY sought to neutralize ethnic tensions rather than manipulate them. Though Tito was catapulted to prominence by the Second World War, his effective ethnic policy enabled him to maintain power for decades. Tito recognized ethnic differences and accounted for them in the government to create a broadly representative and ethnically diverse regime.

But, Tito’s work turned a page in another great narrative of the 20th century – that of the single-party state. Bucking the strong arm of Stalin, Yugoslavia found itself in a paradoxical position. Tito promulgated a government that demanded both ideological uniformity and ethnic diversity, one that enforced equality with repression. How effective was this system? Can any state achieve ethnic harmony, or even ethnic balance, using a centralized single-party model? The experience of the SFRY answers in the affirmative. Whether or not Tito offered the Yugoslav people freedom or democracy, he gave them what they most desperately required - stability, and at least temporary protection from ethnic discord. That capacity to offer unity and security proved a cornerstone for Tito’s single-party state.

¹⁶ (Ramet, 158)

¹⁷ (Busky, 33)

¹⁸ (Denitch, 45)


¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ (Busky, 35)

²¹ Ibid.



Part F – Sources and Word Count

1. Busky, Donald F. *Communism in History and Theory: The European Experience*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002. Online. (page 35)
2. Denitch, Bogdan Denis. *The Legitimation of a Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. Print. 
3. Gewehr, Wesley M. *The Rise of Nationalism in the Balkans 1800-1930*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931. Print.
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