

FRICION AND FACTIONALISM IN THE YUGOSLAV STRUGGLE FOR STABILITY

The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution, 1919-1953

By Aleksa Djilas

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Reviewed by Joseph Rothschild

T*he Contested Country* is a rich, impressive, detailed, and insightful history of the cultural and political attitudes of the peoples of the Yugoslav state toward each other, and of the early Marxist and later Communist efforts to shape, control, and master those attitudes. Written by an author in full command of his primary and secondary sources (in several languages), its romantic neo-Hegelian tone will occasionally disconcert the American reader unfamiliar with, or skeptical toward, that school of historiography. Convinced that the "Yugoslav idea" for unity embodies the logic of the history of the Balkans, Djilas seeks to persuade the reader that the historical process has been straining, probably since medieval times and consciously since the mid-eighteenth century, to become pregnant with the Yugoslav idea and then to bear it and birth it in the form of a healthy, viable Yugoslav state. In this scenario, the socialist movement before World War I, and the Communist one since then—especially during and after World War II—played positive historical roles in serving as the political midwives of this supposed historical urge.

Though I have always been pro-Yugoslav in the sense of applauding its peoples' resistance to Hitler and then Stalin, as well as being intrigued by their efforts to build an alternative system of "participatory, self-managerial" socialism with hopes of achieving internal interethnic concord, I question Djilas's notion of Yugoslavia's manifest "rightness" and "naturalness." It is not because I bear any animus against that country, but because I find this view of history unconvincing. Why should, for example, the Slovenian and Macedonian people be inherently destined to be citizens of the same state just because they speak somewhat related languages even though their histories and cultures vary sharply? Is it not more plausible to present the creation of the Yugoslav state at

the close of World War I, its survival through both World War II and the Stalinist enmity of the 1940s, and its vicissitudes to the present time as the results of contingent political and diplomatic factors rather than as the product of some "world-historical" Hegelian demiurge? Perhaps Aleksa Djilas closes his book in 1953 in order to spare himself from acknowledging the precariousness of his assumption of Yugoslavia's inevitability as well as his view of the self-proclaimed heirs of Marx as the primary achievers of the "brotherhood and unity of the Yugoslav peoples." Thus, relying heavily on Djilas's splendid array of data, I would be inclined to make a strictly secular, empirical, and non-ideological survey of the Yugoslav state, in contrast to his meta-historical one.

The new state of Yugoslavia was one of contrasting topographies, internal mountain barriers, and fragmented communications within and among the several regions. These physical characteristics alone presented a great challenge to political unity.

By virtually every relevant criterion—history, political traditions, socio-economic standards, legal systems, religion, and culture—Yugoslavia was the most complicated of the new Central European states that emerged after World War I. It contained the largest number and variety of pre-1918 regional units. Unlike Czechoslovakia, the new Yugoslav state did not emerge in its entirety from the deceased Hapsburg Empire; unlike Romania, it was not simply an enlargement of a prewar core kingdom; unlike Poland, it was not a restoration of a pre-existing state; and unlike interwar Hungary, it lacked ethnic homogeneity. Its several parts had over the centuries been subsumed within Byzantine, Ottoman, Hungarian, Germanic, and Italian cultural zones. Each part had interwoven the culture of its particular zone with indigenous Southern Slav institutions and styles.

Geography added to the effects of historical fragmentation in hampering the development of Yugoslav unity. The new state was one of contrasting topographies, internal mountain barriers, and fragmented communications within and among the several regions. These physical characteristics alone presented a great challenge to political unity. Populated as it was by widely divergent and antagonistic cultures, with different religions, legal systems, and languages, Yugoslavia was bound to be subjected to profound centrifugal pressures which were to overwhelm its interwar political elite.

The "Yugoslav dream," whose ideological roots lay in nineteenth-century romanticism and nationalism, came to political realization following World War I. Disillusioned and frustrated by the repression of their political and cultural aspirations within the Hapsburg Empire and fearful of Italy's territorial

ambitions, the Hapsburgs' Southern Slav (Slovene, Croatian, and Serbian) elites sought security through the union of their areas with the independent kingdom of Serbia, whose impressive military performance against the Central Powers earned it international prestige.

The government and people of old Serbia entered the new Yugoslavia conscious of being the victor of a desperate war, and viewed Slovenia and Croatia as the liberated and seceded parts of the loser, incapable of defending themselves against covetous neighbors. The Serbs further felt entitled to impose themselves and their institutions upon Yugoslavia by virtue of the fact that their little kingdom had suffered a relatively greater loss of men and wealth than any other participant in that worldwide slaughter. The Southern Slav areas of the Hapsburg Empire, whose regiments had been deployed mainly against Italy, had escaped comparatively unscathed. The Serbs were determined to compensate themselves for their staggering sacrifices at the expense of the less marred parts of the new state, and turned a deaf ear to the Croatian complaints of being reduced to second-class citizens.

Immediate postwar expectations and grievances were superimposed on long-established cultural and political differences and conflicts. While ethnicity and language linked Slovenes, Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs, differing histories, religions, social organizations, and political styles all divided these core Southern Slav communities of interwar Yugoslavia. Complicating the situation further was the existence of major non-Slavic minorities such as the Albanians, Turks, Magyars, Germans, and the Slavic Macedonians whose distinct identity was denied during the interwar decades by the dominant Serbs.

These differences triggered perceptions of cultural superiority and inferiority that proved to be even more incendiary for interwar Yugoslavia than for Czechoslovakia. The political hegemony of the Czechs corresponded with their higher levels of literacy, urbanization, and productivity over the Slovaks. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, the former subjects of the late "Central European" Hapsburg Empire considered themselves more advanced, in terms of all such cultural and socioeconomic criteria, than the "Balkan" Serbs to the south, by whom they were politically dominated to their lasting ire. The Serbs of the prewar Serbian kingdom, in turn, repudiated the cultural pretensions of the northerners and dismissed their political legacies as Austrophile, formalistic, and irresponsible. They viewed themselves as "doers" and the others as "carpers."

Yugoslavia's interwar history closed with major ethnic groups unreconciled, civil liberties violated, economic unification and development stunted, and agrarian problems only partially alleviated at the price of economic and political dependence on Germany. The brutality and cynicism of successive interwar regimes estranged the best of the intelligentsia, while sheer incompetence and corruption alienated the peasants and workers. Although the elites of all of interwar Yugoslavia's ethnic communities were culpable, the Serbian politicians and bureaucrats bear major responsibility for the political fragility and the squandering of the moral capital earned for Yugoslavia by Serbia's heroic World War I performance. Confusing authority with arbitrariness and administration

with police methods, the Serbian politicians and bureaucrats were insensitive to the other communities' cultural, historic, and provincial sensibilities and monopolistic in their grip on the levers of power. It was myopic and contrary to Yugoslav *raison d'état* for the Serbs to exclude civil, diplomatic, and military officers trained under the Hapsburg Empire from Yugoslav state service.

Distinct from, though politically related to, the pattern of Serbian domination was that of administrative centralization, which was a heritage of small Serbia's nineteenth-century experience in state-building. But in twentieth-century Yugoslavia administrative centralism required an excellent communications network and high bureaucratic competence, both of which were lacking. Chronic cabinet instability at the top of the administrative hierarchy further compounded problems of accountability and authority at the bottom. Confusion, delay, waste, and corruption as well as political favoritism and personal nepotism became the *modus operandi* of an overcentralized, overly expensive, but underpaid and well-nigh irresponsible civil service.

For its part, the Croatian Peasant Party (CPP) shares a heavy responsibility for this false ordering of Yugoslav priorities. Already during the 1920s, under the boisterous and unpredictable leadership of Stjepan Radic, the CPP had become so absorbed in ethnic politics that it ceased to be a party of socio-economic reform. It sponsored no reform measures during its brief tenure in government. During its years of ideological and social vigor before World War I, the CPP had conferred a sense of dignity, security, and citizenship on the peasants. But in its declining phase of bureaucratic ossification, mere nationalism, and ideological senility of the late 1930s, the CPP permitted itself to be infiltrated by fascist elements and reactionary ideas. Committed to denying the manifest trends of economic and social differentiation in the village, the CPP was blind to the need for industrialization.

It was only after the German army had exposed the brittleness of the Yugoslav state apparatus in the April 1941 invasion, that the country's pent-up ethnic and social rages exploded into civil and revolutionary war. Despite the endemic ethnic tensions, the idea of a Yugoslav state had been accepted throughout the interwar decades by the influential elements in the several ethnic communities, though the idea itself did not suffice to effect their reconciliation.

Hitler's conquest of Yugoslavia in April 1941 was extraordinarily swift and easy, accomplished in slightly more than one week, and his vastly more portentous invasion of the Soviet Union soon relegated this vanquished Balkan country to a strategic backwater. It became a particularly expensive backwater, however, after the resistance movements emerged and, by 1943, had tied down 125,000 German and 300,000 Italian troops. Most of the resistance movements arose in defense of one or another of the ethnohistorical territories from which the Yugoslav state had been amalgamated in 1918-1920. The exception was the Communist-led Partisan guerrilla movement headed by Josip Broz Tito, which astutely committed itself to an all-Yugoslav strategy, despite the ethnonational tensions of the interwar decades. This decision put the Partisan movement on a collision course with the more provincial and parochial defense movements and with Hitler's overall disposition of his Yugoslav conquest.

The moral and psychological impact of the April 1941 defeat by the Germans was even more devastating for the Serbs than for the other Yugoslav ethnations. Their renowned army had quickly crumbled and their seemingly powerful state apparatus was destroyed. Out of this failure grew a general disillusionment with the entire interwar system and its ruling regime. As the war progressed, this disillusionment was strengthened by exemplary Soviet Russian feats of arms, from which the Communist-led Partisans would eventually benefit.

Capitalizing on these uncertain times, Tito developed a strategy that was both militarily and politically innovative, albeit calculating. He accepted, indeed welcomed, the indiscriminate mass reprisals provoked by his harassment of the German forces; villagers could escape slaughter only by joining his mobile Partisan columns. Pushed out of western Serbia at the end of 1941, the Partisans migrated first to Montenegro and then to Bosnia, where they transcended the fierce local ethnonational enmities by protecting all from all—Serbs from Ustasa (Croatian) atrocities, Croats and Muslims from Cetnik (Serbian) vengeance—and molding volunteers from all the communities into a common Yugoslav phalanx against the Axis occupiers.

It would be an error to believe that interethnic friction, in Yugoslavia or anywhere else, is directly "caused" by socioeconomic inequality between and among ethnic communities; yet, by the same token, it would be an illusion to expect that correcting such inequality would necessarily solve the ethnonational "question."

Although several German, Italian, Ustasa, Cetnik, and Bulgarian punitive offensives kept Tito's forces ever on the move, liberated zones were carved out in which Communist-controlled (but authentically participatory) political mechanisms and popular institutions were developed. That these early liberated Partisan zones were within the nominally sovereign state of Croatia further discredited the puppet regime. Indeed, by the spring of 1943, the Croatian government controlled little outside the city of Zagreb. After the fall of Mussolini and the surrender of Italy in the summer of 1943, the liberated zones were extended to Montenegro, Dalmatia and the islands, and intermittently, to southern Slovenia. Although heavy fighting persisted through 1944, that year marked a sustained series of political victories for the Partisan movement. The Yugoslav peoples rallied massively to Tito's attractive combination of patriotic, revolutionary, and federalist slogans and programs.

Although Tito was successful in projecting his roles as anti-German liberator and transethnic reconciler, one cannot overlook the third leg of his politico-

ideological triad, the Communist revolutionary platform. Already in the summer of 1941, with the launching of the Communist party's Partisan movement, Tito stated that their purpose was "to prepare to seize power, and to seize it in such a way that the bourgeoisie would never regain it."¹ He never deviated from this rhetoric, despite Stalin's concern that such blatancy would jeopardize the global as well as local anti-Nazi coalition.

One of the reasons why this revolutionary aim was acceptable to many Yugoslavs, otherwise disinclined to communism, was the ignominious collapse of the interwar regime and army in April 1941, exposing the interwar socio-political system as a sham. The Partisans won authentic support without denying their Communist aspirations because of the appeal of collectivism to Yugoslavia's rural mountaineer folk, the attraction of prosperity through industrialization to marginalized peasantries, and the readiness of hitherto apathetic, alienated, or "prepolitical" sectors of the population to be politicized in the turbulent, yet exhilarating, setting of war. The personal quality of Tito's leadership combined with the Communist paramilitary and administrative experience gained during the Spanish Civil War, added to the attractiveness of the Partisan message. Finally, the native competitors had compromised themselves by collaborating with the occupiers or by participating in interethnic atrocities, leaving the Partisans as the only party that could plausibly project a transethnic, all-Yugoslav patriotism.

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Although reconsolidated during the Titoist regime's successful defiance of Stalin in the late 1940s and early 1950s, this transethnic all-Yugoslav patriotism evanesced over the subsequent decades. Socialism failed to alleviate inter-regional and interethnic discrepancies and frictions. It would be an error to believe that interethnic friction, in Yugoslavia or anywhere else, is directly "caused" by socioeconomic inequality between and among ethnic communities; yet, by the same token, it would be an illusion to expect that correcting such inequality would necessarily solve the ethnopolitical "question." Nevertheless, there is no disputing that such inequality exacerbates ethnic friction. Despite a politico-ideological commitment to eventual equality and substantial developmental advances in the poorer southern regions, the gap between the south and the richer northern regions has been widening. Moreover, much of the impress-

1. Vladimir Dedijer, *Josip Broz Tito: Prilozi za Biografiju* (1957), 260.

ive investment in the poor regions has gone into capital-intensive, not labor-intensive, extractive and heavy industries, thus leaving many of the social pathologies of underdevelopment, such as unemployment and apathy, relatively untouched and unimproved. Yugoslavia's continuing low productivity and chronic stagflation also impair its competitiveness in hard-currency countries.

Yet, its ominous fragilities acknowledged, the Yugoslav political system also registered some real, if prosaic, successes. The system has remained hospitable toward and supportive of the cultural and educational aspirations of all its component ethnations. Until the great East Central European watershed year of 1989, Yugoslavia continued to render to its citizens a wider range of civil freedoms and a broader choice of consumer products than any other Communist system. Despite dire predictions to the contrary, it weathered the death of Tito in May 1980 without general turmoil, elite fragmentation, institutional discontinuity, or loss of effective political independence.

There is now a pervasive sense that systemic reform and rejuvenation are needed, although there is no corresponding consensus on the direction, pace, initiation, scope, or control of such reforms. Yet, the fact that this system has in the past made several quite profound changes without disintegrating, buttresses my expectations that the elite can once again make some hard decisions and master Yugoslavia's delicate domestic stresses, even in the teeth of the current centrifugal crisis. But Yugoslavia's international roles during the Titoist years as the solvent of Stalinism, the shaker and then the balancer of the Communist world, the energizer of the nonaligned camp, and the self-proclaimed innovator of a new type of politico-economic model with global applications is now beyond the capacity or even the aspiration of the Yugoslav system.

This assessment is not meant to make light of the acute severity of Yugoslavia's current crises. I would understand if others deem my optimism Polyannish in light of the shellings, bombings, desertions, and substantial casualties inflicted by Croats and Serbs on each other daily. Nevertheless, I draw my residual hope for Yugoslavia not only from its track record since the 1940s, but also from an additional inference drawn from Djilas's book. Djilas implies that whereas before and during both world wars the neighboring Big Powers were predatorily eager to intervene in the Yugoslav lands, today the successors of those powers—namely, America, Russia, and NATO—are not trying to capitalize on the country's problems. Indeed, perhaps they are being excessively fastidious in their restraint, notwithstanding the current embargoes. Thus, the fact that the Yugoslav crisis is perceived as strictly a domestic crisis, albeit a severe one, and is not compounded by international aggravation, interference, and exploitation, gives me hope that reason may yet prevail and domestic consensus on the state's survival will be restored.

