

The Impact of Nationalism in the 1990s Yugoslav Crisis

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Abstract: For centuries, the Balkans was the border of the Western world and the Eastern world. It was the region of conflict between large empires; the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Austrian empire set their sight wanting to conquer this area. It gained a nickname for its features, as the “Powder keg of Europe”. Located in the Balkans, Yugoslavia is an ethnically diverse country. Under doctrines and principle of nationalism, ethnical tension within the country grows, and it reached a peak during the Yugoslav Crisis, which atrocities and war crime against humanity were committed. This paper aims to collect and summarize the role of nationalism in the course of the Yugoslav Crisis in the 1990s. It shows that former Yugoslavia’s issue appears to have been resolved. The sole outcome was redrawing the political map based on violence and terror.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, nationalism, ethnic groups

1. Introduction

Following the Revolutions of 1989, Eastern Europe underwent rapid political changes that overthrow communist regimes. Former Yugoslavia was one, and as nationalism grow, nationalist parties started to replace the communist. The nation collapsed in the 1990s, following by a series of internal wars called the Yugoslav wars. It was these wars and independent movements that created the modern-day Balkan states that broke up from Yugoslavia.

By drawing upon diverse sources from various international institutions, this paper seeks to collect and summarize the role of nationalism in the course of the Yugoslav Crisis in the 1990s. It further examines the issues that were caused by the Yugoslav Crisis and what the outcome was for the region. It looks especially at the issues of ethnic groups in the region and asks how they played out in the crisis.

2. A Brief History of Yugoslavia and Nationalism during the 1990s

It was 1918, at the end of the first world war, when Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was formed by independent countries of Serbia and Montenegro, which merged with former Austrian-Hungarian territories of Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia and Vojvodina. The South Slavs were united under one banner, and it had never happened before 1918 [1]. The Kingdom was renamed in 1929 to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The newly established monarchy was soon under fascist threats when Nazi Germany occupied most of Europe including Denmark, Norway, France, and the low countries. Its neighbor countries

Romania, Hungarian, and Bulgaria had joined the Axis through the Tripartite Pact. On March 25, 1941, after months of negotiations with Germany, Prince Paul of Yugoslavia agreed to sign the pact as well. However, two days later he was overthrown by a pro-British coup d'état, and was replaced by Peter II to power. The Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe forces soon defeated the Yugoslav army, and occupied its region. The first partition occurred, with Croatia became the fascist puppet state governed by the Ustaše (Croatian ultranationalist organization), Montenegro became an Italian puppet state, Serbian became a German puppet state, and much of Yugoslavia's territory ceded to its neighboring countries [2]. After Allies liberation of the country in the course of 1944 and 1945, the Yugoslav monarchy was abolished, and a socialist republic replaced it. The leader of this republic was Josip Broz Tito, one of the communist founders of the Yugoslav Partisans, which later became the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA).

Tito advocated for a common Yugoslav identity, and sought to suppress any form of state nationalism within the country; one of his slogans was "Brotherhood and Unity". Although Tito was a communist leader, he led the country to broke away from Soviet and Stalin's hegemony, and adopted market socialism principles in the economy unlike other members of the Eastern Bloc. In 1961, with the Cold War as political background, Tito was one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, which wanted distancing away from the American led NATO, and Soviet led Warsaw Pact [3]. He eventually passed away in 1980, and his death meant that this country now lacked a strong and assertive political figure to contain the rise of nationalism. Nationalist sentiments grew quickly especially in the more industrial regions, in Slovenia and Croatia, because they did not want their wealth to be distributed to less developed regions such as Bosnia or Montenegro.

By the end of 1991, Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia declared independence as a result of referendums. While Macedonia was allowed to peacefully breakup from Yugoslavia, Slovenia and Croatia fought independent wars against the JNA forces. Serbia on the other hand, allied with Montenegro, sought to prevent Yugoslavia from falling apart since it was them who held the most power in the federation, and in JNA. Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) were complex however, the ethnic composition was roughly 31.2% Orthodox Christian Bosnian Serbs, 43.5% Muslim Bosniaks, and 17.4% Catholic Croats, and 7.9% others [4]. In the late 1991, Croats in Bosnia formed an independent state from Bosnia, called Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia (HB).

Moreover, in early 1992, Bosnia held an independent referendum in which 63% of the population turnout with 99 percent of voters voted "For" [5]. The statistics implied that it was mainly the Bosniaks (Bosnia Muslim) who voted, and Bosnian Serbs boycotted the vote. After passing of the referendum, Bosnian Serbs declared their own state called Republika Srpska (RS), and it is essential to mention that both HB and VRS were not recognized internationally as legal states, but RS was recognized and supported by Slobodan Milošević, leader of Serbia and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FR Yugoslavia), as well as an extreme Serbian nationalist who sought to create the "Greater Serbia".

3. Ethnic Conflicts Born under Nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia declared independent from Yugoslavia on March 1 1992 after the referendum, and almost immediately, fighting starts. At the beginning, Bosniaks and Croats allied against the RS and the JNA, but was no match because the JNA had superior weaponry. With tanks and artillery positioned surrounding the city of Sarajevo (Capital of BiH), the siege began, and it would last almost the entirety of the war for four years. "Reports estimate that the Sarajevo Romanija Corps numbers some 13,000 troops which are formed into eight brigades directly surrounding the city. [6]" The city was surrounded by mountains from the North, East, and South, with the only way out was to pass through the airport in the West, which was heavily guarded by JNA troops. JNA snipers were deployed on the mountains, firing at civilians within the city; the "Sniper Alley" was the name given to urban

areas that were most frequently attacked by snipers [7]. The city was under artillery barrages as well, used to weakening the garrison Bosnian army in certain stages of the siege, essential supplies like food, medicine, or electricity that were supposed to be distributed to Sarajevo's population was cut off.

In July of 1992, although the UN was involved in the war, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) campaign to provide humanitarian support for "displaced, hungry, and wounded victims" [8], it focused mainly on its peacekeeping principles, rather than to prevent the continuous advancement and attack of the RS and the JNA. By the end of 1992, ethnic tensions in BiH became more complex between the previous allies Bosnian-Croats and Bosniaks; their forces went to war with each other, called "A War within a War". The Bosniak city of Mostar was under assault by the Croats, and this was another case of civilian murders and city destruction. The enforcement of "No-Fly Zone" by UN utilizing NATO air force did not stop the ethnic conflict in BiH, since most of the military actions were ground based [9]. In 1993, the UN established "Safe Zones" to provide protections for civilians, mostly Muslim Bosniaks, that were being persecuted by Bosnian-Serbs. However, the truth is, members from UN were not contributing enough troops to properly fortify the "Safe Zones", and the result is that there were constant civilian attacks and raids. Radovan Karadžić, leader of RS, refused to sign the Vance-Owen plan, which separate the country into three Bosniak territory, three Croat territory, and three Serb territory, with a neutral ethnically-mixed capital of Sarajevo [10]. This meant that RS aggression in BiH continues. Later on in 1994, United States under Bill Clinton's presidency, helped negotiate peace between the HB and the Bosniak forces under Washington Agreement were fighting against the Serbs once again [11].

Realizing the impact of economic sanctions imposed by the UN, Slobodan Milosevic decided to withdrawal from the Bosnian war, and stopped sending weapons and troops to Bosnia.

One of the "Safe Zones" Srebrenica comprised of almost 10,000 Bosniaks, was under RS aggression on July, 1995 [12]. Radovan Karadžić ordered the takeover of Srebrenica, almost facing no resistance from the UN Dutch Battalion and the BiH forces. The RS forces took 8,000 Bosniaks male hostage including teenagers and children, and systematically kill them [13]. According to the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, "This genocide was a terrible crime – the worst on European soil since the Second World War".

In December 1995, the Dayton Accords was signed by presidents of the Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, effectively ending the Bosnian war, with the newly established borders of two entities, BiH and RS, within one country [14]. International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), formed in 1993, was responsible to deal with the aftermath, including war crimes and inhumanities committed in the course of the Yugoslav Crisis.

4. The Role of Nationalism in the Yugoslav Crisis

The concept of nationalism is never easy to define, but there is common characteristic that could be found, like the inherent xenophobia. Hans Kohn, a pioneer in the study of nationalism described it as "a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation state" [15]. The Kosovo Myth, as an example, was used to fortify nationalist sentiments in Serbia; the common past and the emotional identification acquired through the common past create common identity. Constructing collective identity and common social memory is an effective strategy used to bolster nationalism.

In the case of the Yugoslav Crisis, the three ethnic groups within BiH essentially had similar nationalist ideas, that is to become a part of their "Mother Country", or occupy another region because of their presence for their ethnic groups. However, the Bosnian circumstances along with external intervention did not allow such to happen.

From the Serbian perspective, it was at their best interest to preserve Yugoslavia as its administration was dominated by ethnic Serbs, and it owns territory outside Serbia. Slobodan

Milošević with his nationalist policies, sought to further pursuit for his Serbian ethnicity and create the “Greater Serbia” in the minds of Serbian people, but he did it through waging wars and provide support to inhumane actions in Bosnia. It is vital to mention that these ethnic cleaning and mass genocide were justified: The Serbs claimed that it was the revenge for the Ustaše Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia targeting ethnic Serbs during World War II, and the Srebrenica Massacre as revenge for the Kravica attack in 1993. Therefore, Serbian nationalism to some extent, increased the public supportive attitude towards wars and violence against the Croats and the Bosniaks, because of this establishment of a “National Enemy” resulted from national atrocities Ustaše did to their forefathers [16].

Religious factors, were also used in boosting nationalism during the Yugoslav wars. Since Bosnia was dominated by the three distinct religious branch, Catholic, Orthodox and Islam, they blame the others that it was a religious war. For instance, in history textbook used by high school seniors in Serbia, “(The Vatican) launched a battle against Orthodoxy and Serbs through the Catholic Church and its allies [17].” The Yugoslav wars were not a religious war sin essence, but the use of religion and religious symbols by nationalists helped justify the legitimacy of hatred and violence to others.

5. Conclusion

Former Yugoslavia’s issue appears to have been resolved. The sole outcome has been redrawing the political map based on violence and terror. Croats, Muslims, Serbs, and other ethnic groups in Yugoslavia saw century-old communities destroyed by murder and threats of murder, resulting in more ethnically homogenous countries.

In total, 161 people were accused of committing genocide, crimes against humanity, violations of the rules or customs of war, or severe violations of the Geneva Convention by the ICTY [18]. The crisis had devastating effects on the Yugoslav people, resulting in numerous human lives, significant material losses, and the forced emigration of enormous numbers of people. The crisis caused massive human casualties and huge material losses, forcing large numbers of refugees to leave their homes, and had a disastrous effect on the Yugoslav people overall.

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