

Understanding violent the breakup of yugoslavia politics essay



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The numerous ethnic groups that comprised Yugoslavia held historical animosities towards each other stretching back in some cases hundreds of years. Yet these animosities were put aside after World War Two and under Tito's grip the nation achieved internal peace. They were not however forgotten and when nationalist politicians needed to create a power base, they merely had to promote nationalist symbols and myths, and encourage the discussion and exaggeration of past atrocities. This created a deadly snowball affect that proved unstoppable.

Yugoslavia has long been an ethnic melting point where great civilizations and religions have met. The Paris Peace Conference at the end of World War One created the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes out of territory from the Austrian and Turkish empires. The allies hoped the Kingdom's people would forge a new common identity based on their shared status as Southern Slavs. They were however divided in various other ways. Croats and Slovenes were Roman Catholic, used the Latin alphabet and orientated towards western and central Europe. In contrast Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins were under the repressive autocratic control of the Ottoman Turks, Eastern Orthodox in religion, used the Cyrillic alphabet and were less economically developed. Bosnians, though much like the Serbs had practiced Bogomilism and converted to Islam only in exchange for autonomy and protection by the Turks. The Serbs regularly rose against the Turks and were subsequently heavily repressed, thus considered the Bosnian Muslims Slavs that had sold out. During World War Two these antagonisms flared into outright slaughter as the Nazi controlled ethnically Croat Ustashe puppet regime murdered innocent Serbs, Jews and others. The regime never had

majority Croatian support but this was irrelevant to Serbs in the conflicts of the 1990s even though they themselves did not have clean hands. Josip Tito and his communists suppressed discussion on the wartime genocide and earlier nationalist outrages in the process creating a powerful reservoir of suppressed memories and hatred.

Tito re-established Yugoslavia through the skilful use of fear and the credibility of communist ideology. Yugoslavs feared many things including a return to the carnage of wartime massacres, the power of the Soviet Union and some a great Serbian restoration. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) as the only substantial pan-Yugoslavian institution was thus the only force capable of allaying these fears. Fear and force did in time give way to compromise that was eventually enshrined in the 1974 Yugoslav constitution. This constitution established a collective presidency, rotating chair and dissolved a great deal of power to the republics thus weakening federal institutions. Tito himself often kept this system going by ordering republics to follow federal laws.

Tito's death in 1980 combined with the end of Cold War rivalry and the decline of communist ideology in the rest of Europe in the 1980s lead to the severe weakening of Yugoslavia's crucial unifying factors. In addition, Yugoslavia in the 1980s increasingly suffered from an unprecedented economic crisis. This crisis was triggered by the oil shocks of the 1970s, the global recession of the 1980s and a \$US20 billion foreign debt. This caused Slovenia and other relatively economically prosperous regions to push for economic and political change. Slovenia had significant economic weight as while it comprised only eight percent of the nation's population it produced <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-violent-the-breakup-of-yugoslavia-politics-essay/>

20 percent of the national GNP. Without a powerful central figure, differences between reformers and conservatives produced a deadlock at the centre during the early and mid 1980s. The economy thus continued its decline allowing conservative groups time to mobilize support.

Long significant to the Serb nation, Kosovo became the catalyst for the revival of Serbian nationalism. After a 1981 demonstration in favor of Kosovo gaining republic status the death toll of Albanian youths killed by Serb police varied widely from nine anywhere up to 1000. The Serbs balked at this demand believing they were the oppressed side in this situation. Thirty thousand Serbs and Montenegrins did flee Kosovo in the 1980s though many for economic reasons. The higher Albanian birth rate also contributed to the decline in the relative number of Serbs in Kosovo from 23 percent of the population in 1971 to 10 percent in 1989. Led by the Serbian Academy for Sciences and Arts from 1986 prominent Serbs claimed they had been the victim of consistent discrimination in Yugoslavia. Kosovo was thus raised to the position of most important problem in Serbia and frustration in the League of Communists of Serbia over the issue reached unprecedented levels.

Slobodan Milosevic promise of quick and decisive action against Albanian separatists in Kosovo won him widespread support in Serbia. Milosevic moved quickly to promote Serbs to important economic and political roles in Kosovo and by 1989-1990 Serbian control over Kosovo was complete. In his first six months of power, he also purged Serbia of rivals and moderates.

Journalists, writers and editors were fired and Milosevic supporters soon controlled almost all public life in Serbia. In order to bully and overthrow the

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Kosovo and Vojvodina political leaderships Milosevic whipped up pro-Serb demonstrations in the previously autonomous regions. The Montenegrin leadership was also overthrown with all three being replaced by Milosevic loyalists. This gave the Serb nationalists control of four of the eight votes in the Yugoslavian federation. Serbian hardliners used the cloak of nationalism to revoke the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina thus altering the Serbian constitution and the delicate balance of power in Yugoslavia.

Slovenia and Croatia reacted angrily to this series of events. Public disagreement was not permitted between communist party members therefore it was intellectuals and the media that articulated this anger. Slovenian intellectuals protested publicly at the treatment given to the Kosovo Albanians. They did so because they feared the consequences of the Serb action had upset Slovenia's political and economic role in Yugoslavia, and would prevent movement towards its goals of democratising Yugoslavia and integrating it economically with the west. The last LCY congress in January 1990 confirmed that neither democratic nor hard-line reform could occur at the national level. The Croatian and Slovenian communist parties quickly responded by giving up their power and holding multi-party elections.

The multi-party political system that resulted from the 1990 elections was seriously flawed. Political parties of which there were a large number lacked time and resources to develop a wide range of policies. Voters were thus denied the information they needed to make informed decisions. Additionally there was no chance to vote to maintain Yugoslavia even though 62 percent of Yugoslavs claimed Yugoslavian affiliation was very, or quite, important to them in a 1990 survey of 4, 232 people. Nationalists claims that other groups

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would block vote successfully turned it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Every town experienced the founding of political parties and the divisive nationalist discourse that went with them. Peer pressure to support ones ethnic group in these towns was intense. The nationalist parties did not win majorities in these elections. Because the way the elections were designed they received majorities in their republics. Franjo Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union and Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia won only 41.5% and 47% of the votes respectively but gained 56% and 78% of the seats. These parties purged, often violently, their political opponents from power and made it dangerous to be seen as or in the company of known moderates. The politicians elected in 1990 were far more nationalist than their citizens.

Understanding Violent The Breakup Of Yugoslavia

The continuing stalemate and increasing tension over Yugoslavia's economic and political direction convinced Slovenia and Croatia their futures lay elsewhere, and both declared independence in June 1991. The victory by Slovenian in the resulting war against the Yugoslav People's Army (JPA) forced the Serbs to give up their hopes for a centralized Yugoslav state under Serb control. Serb nationalists instead set themselves the goal of creating a greater Serbian state. The result was war in Croatia. The other significant result of the Slovenian and Croatian declarations of independence was that they forced the Bosnian Muslims to do likewise. Bosnian President Alija Izetberovic and many of his people realized all too clearly they would have little protection in a rump Yugoslavia dominated by Milosevic and Serb nationalists.

Leaders on all sides constantly exploited the fear of becoming vulnerable to other ethnic groups through inaction during the break up of Yugoslavia. Both Tudjman and Milosevic consciously revived nationalist ideologies tainted by the Second World War. Once a leader of a republic broke the pattern of compromise and instead choose to increase interregional tensions the writing, Yugoslavia was on the wall. The slanting of news coverage by Milosevic appointees forced media in other republics to follow suit least their ethnic group become disadvantaged. Exaggeration became common as Serb and Croat intellectuals successfully transferred their nationalist ideologies to the common people. The Ustasu concentration camp at Jasenovac where 60, 000 to 80, 000 inmates were slaughtered, not all of them Serbs was inflated into the murder of 700, 000 Serbs alone by Serb nationalists and Serbian media. The numbers game was however played by all sides. Repetition is considered the single most important element in the changing of opinions. Tudjman and Croat nationalists' excessive use of Second World War symbols especially the Ustasu flag frightened many Serbs into believing history would repeat itself. Collectively this created a security dilemma where no side could trust the other. Like their Croat neighbors the Bosnian leaders were also guilty of not paying enough attention to the complexity and fears of Serbian societies within their boundaries. By failing to recognize the difference between passive and adaptable urban Serbs and more extremist rural Serbs Tudjman missed an opportunity to build a multi-ethnic coalition. The behavior of political elites was a major source of ethnic hatred in Yugoslavia.

Additional causes contributed to the sheer scale of the violence that followed the collapse of Yugoslavia. The JPA took a political role as its officers believed only a federal and socialist Yugoslavia could support their existing corporate and individual privileges. Up to 70 percent of the officer core were Serbian and Montenegrin and it was also a bedrock of Marxism-Leninism. The credibility of the army came from the days of communist resistance in the Second World War and as the communist party fell from favor so too did the army. With this loss of credibility, the JPA became in effect the army of the Serbian state. This is important because the scale of violence and acts of destruction such as the shelling of Sarajevo would have been impossible without a powerful military force. The inheritance by Serb forces of the majority of Yugoslavia's weapons and especially its heavy weapons gave the Serbs the military power required to carry out their plans.

Backed by the JPA Serbian civilian, militias were able to terrorize minorities in Serb controlled areas. The militias were organized from soccer clubs notably the infamous Arkan Tiger's, prisons and from volunteers. Merged with the peer pressure, lack of accountability and promised economic gain these militia committed acts of ethnic violence out of all proportion to what could have been deemed acceptable under normal conditions. Croats and to a lesser extent Muslims also formed militias and violently attacked ethnic opponents. These were never on the same scale nor had the same level of organization as the Serbian militias and were largely formed as response to the formation of the Serbian militias.

The west intervened in the break up of Yugoslavia relatively early and regularly but never with enough collective will or military force to prevent <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-violent-the-breakup-of-yugoslavia-politics-essay/>

large-scale warfare. The period of the early Yugoslav wars was a dramatic time internationally with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait distracting Western powers. A global recession further reduced the west's desire to intervene in a country some saw as a quagmire without strategic significance whilst others considered the area vital due to Yugoslavia's geopolitical significance. By January 1992 fifteen ceasefires had been arranged and broken by all sides. Numerous internationally brokered peace plans followed. Serbian and Croatian leaders who consistently acted in ways to that continued the violence certainly did not help western efforts. However, the more pressing problem was America's and Europe's weak and timid initial responses which did nothing to persuade Milosevic and Tudjman to suspend their use of violence. Whether an overwhelming display of western resolve through the commitment of significant combat troops would have altered the course of events is unknown. It is however hard to see how such a display of force could have made things worse. The political will to impose a solution on Yugoslavia was simply not present at the time.

Yugoslavia was a nation with suppressed and potentially explosive historical memories. By the 1980s the majority of Yugoslavs lived in peace often side by side with other ethnic groups. It took a culmination of economic decline, a changing international system and most importantly leaders willing and able to exploit these memories and their resulting fears to rip Yugoslavia apart. Political elites insistence on nationalist ideologies, Serbian military superiority and a lack of Western will ensured this break up was both brutal and extremely violent