The Disintegration of Yugoslavia’s Communist Federation

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The disintegration of Yugoslavia in its post-1945 form brought forcefully into question the viability of one peculiar model of state organization for multinational conglomerates. Like Soviet Russia in 1918, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1968, the renewed Yugoslavia in 1944-1946 proclaimed itself a federation of a republican form. It also had several other important traits in common with these states.

If one discounts the previous boastful propaganda claims by former communist regimes about the presumably immense superiority of “socialist federations” over the “bourgeois” ones, there is nothing particularly unique, in a world-wide perspective, about the second Yugoslavia’s failure. It must be admitted that no form of political system automatically guarantees a state’s stability and longevity. However, the origin, development, and mode of disintegration in Yugoslavia’s case have had a number of peculiarities which set it apart from the USSR and the CSFR. The margin between its survival and irreparable breakdown had been rather slim in 1989-1990 and its disintegration as a community of nations was avoidable.


After its second foundation in 1944-1946, this time as a federal state, Yugoslavia existed within its post-1945 borders and with all founding republics for only about 46 years. The Yugoslav experience in institutionalized consensual decision-making and conflict-management was, in fact, much shorter than this and could be counted not in decades but in years. The second Yugoslavia had,
from the very outset, been burdened by the previous negative experience of centralism, unitarism, forced assimilation, outright national discrimination, and colonial oppression. In the “first” Yugoslavia these policies were carried out by the bureaucracy belonging mostly to the biggest national group—the Serbs. Compared with the dominant national groups in the USSR and Czechoslovakia, the Serbs in Yugoslavia had always been the weakest, measured by their share in the population, as well as by economic, intellectual, and managerial potential. They dominated only the political elite, the military, and the police. Like Czechoslovakia, the “Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes” (the state’s second name) we built on the theory of a one-nation state comprising three South Slavic tribes (hence the third name “Yugoslavia”).

The debilitating factor of colonial heritage had played a less salient role in the second Yugoslavia than in the USSR but a more prominent one than in the second Czechoslovakia. Although sometimes mechanically compared as an “empire” to the USSR, Yugoslavia differed from that Eurasian giant, apart from its much smaller size, in at least one very important respect. Yugoslavia, like Czechoslovakia, did not come about from colonial conquests by the dominant Slavic national groups. Instead it was founded as an almost voluntary association of several small Slavic nations on the ruins of three colonial empires ruled by non-Slavs. Yugoslavia was joined by the South Slavs twice, both times, however, under the very irregular circumstances which followed the First and the Second World Wars. Both associations were initially in the form of a confederation between the Kingdom of Serbia and the “State of the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs” (in 1918) and the national liberation movement in nine lands (1941-1944). These constituent parts had their state institutions, distinct military commands and units, and used different currencies, etc.

Both times, Yugoslavia also contained a notable involuntary element which ran contrary to the principle of self-determination (otherwise vehemently claimed for themselves by the South Slavic nations). This element concerned mostly, but not exclusively, large non-Slavic communities in the new state. For instance, in the region of Vojvodina, annexed by Serbia, the ethnic Serbs constituted then only around a quarter of its population. The declaration of Vojvodina’s unification with Serbia (to which it had never historically belonged) was made by the self-appointed representatives of that minority. The majority in Vojvodina was not asked and no referendum was held. Less than three decades later, the former non-Serbian majority was partly expelled and its remnants became a dominated minority in the region.¹

¹) Very similar methods of territorial aggrandizement and genocide were utilized in 1991 by the Serbs in Eastern and Western Slovenia, Baranya, and Southern Dalmatia against the Croats, Hungarians, and other non-Serbs. Terror, manslaughter, and expulsion, combined with the organized implantation of new Serbian settlers were used. New rump “autonomous regional authorities were proclaimed with the clear intention of annexation by Serbia and Montenegro.