The Effect of Nationalist Ideology on Violence in Yugoslavia in the 1990s

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This essay will consider how the emergence of nationalist ideology contributed towards the violence that took place in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Firstly, how changes in the geo-political landscape affected the rationale for the republics maintaining the Yugoslav Federation are discussed, along with the concomitant demands for independence and democratic rule that lead to the Federation's demise. Secondly, the success of organic nationalists and the political potency of nationalist ideology in the free elections of the 1990s is considered; followed by the significance of nationalist ideology's conflation of the 'nation' and the 'state' in determining public policy and the rights of individuals, and the negative implications this had for ethnic minorities who fell outside of the "imagined" ethnic-majority community. Finally, the author concludes that nationalist ideology contributed to the violence in the former Yugoslavia by politicising nationality and ethnicity and thus providing the moral, political and military impetus to ethnically cleanse areas of contested territories to create a 'fit' between the nation, ethnically defined, and the state.

Since WW2, Marshal Tito had held Yugoslavia's six republics of Yugoslavia together with an "iron hand" under the communist slogan of 'brotherhood and unity': repressing any hints of nationalism that festered within the Yugoslav republic (The Death Of Yugoslavia: 1995). Indeed, Michael Mann refers to this suppression of nationalist-based ethnic conflict as "probably the greatest achievement of communism, unmatched by later democratising countries" (Mann 2005: 354). Yugoslavia's formation during the settlement of WW1 was based on geo-political reasons, as in their unison the republics "formed a second-rank power able to defend its territory against any regional rival" (Mann 2005: 366). Despite the nationalist antagonisms which did fiercely temper in the inter-war period, the same geo-political logic re-emerged after 1945, and Tito, after breaking away from Stalin in 1948, was able to exploit the federation's neutrality between the superpowers during the Cold War and maintained one of the largest armies in Europe (Mann 2005: 366). However, the fall of the Soviet Union rendered the federation's geo-political logic redundant as it was no longer needed for defence purposes, and, moreover, the majority of the republics "disliked the form of federation they actually had – communist, militarist and somewhat Serb-dominated" (Mann 2005: 366).

The first free elections in the 1990s in each of the republics proved to be an "ethnic census", and the demand for democracy killed off Yugoslav federalism (Snyder 2000) and fostered the "internationalisation of political space" (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 126). Even in Bosnia, which had the most ethnically diverse republic – 44% Muslims, 31% Serbs, 17% Croats, and the remaining 5% consisting of Yugoslav, Jews and Roma people (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 128) – the "three victorious parties were all ethnically based, one in each main community" (Mann 2005: 368). The political space nourished the eventual rise of "rule by organic nationalists committed to majoritarian ethnic democracy" (Mann 2005: 367) in the republics, whereby, with the exception of Serbia's leader, Slobodan Milosevic, who favoured a more "compact federation" that better protected the perceived threat to Serbs within other republics and the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, each leader of the constituent nations pursued with demands for independence (Mann 2005: 369). Being that the Yugoslav constitution was a federation of nations – ethnically defined – and that nations, not republics, were the bearers of rights and had the liberty to secede and form majoritarian democracies (Hayden 1996: 787), the grounding was in place for organicist conceptions of the nation

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state to politically prosper. Mann defines the organicist conception of the nation state as having: "(1)a national essence, distinguishable from other national essences; (2) the… right to a state which would ultimately express this essence; (3) the… right to exclude 'others', with different essences, who would weaken the nation" (Mann 1999: 7). In light of this phenomena, Hayden has argued that the elections in the 1990s did not replace state socialism with democracy, instead, the transition was one from "regimes dedicated to advancing the interests of that part of the population defined constitutionally as "the working class and all working people" to regimes dedicated to advancing the interests of that part of the population defined as the ethno-national majority" (Hayden 1996: 790).

Organic-nationalist electioneering proved politically potent in the 1990s as nationalist parties could draw on recent historical reference points and ideologically reinterpret them to fit into "the modern ideal of the nation state" (Mann 2005: 361). Indeed, as Anderson asserts, nationalism is best understood not as a self-conscious ideology that is drawn upon, but "with the large cultural system that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it (comes) into being" (Anderson 2006: 12). As recently as WW2, memories of the Serb Chetnik movement could be reinvigorated by Croatian nationalists; a Serbian movement that combined organic nationalism and paramilitarism with the aim of creating a homogeneous Serbia (Mann 2005: 294), thus necessitating the oppression of Croats within the territory. A memory of even greater severity was the ethnic cleansing of Serbs by the extreme Croat nationalists known as the 'Ustasha' during the same period. The Ustasha carried out various methods of ethnic cleansing against Serbs within the "Independent state of Croatia", with the openly stated goal of "one-third expel(ing), one-third convert(ing), one-third slaughter(ing)" (Mann 2005: 296) of Serbs within Croatian territory: a goal that was two-thirds achieved (Mann 2005: 296). Indeed, as Mann describes: "from 200,000 to 300,000 Serbs were expelled into German-controlled territories, many dying on the way, and 240,000 to 350,000 Orthodox Serbs were forcibly converted to Catholicism (or faced the alternative of) going to concentration camps" (Mann 2005: 296).

Drawing upon even earlier primordial cultural claims, Slobodan Milosevic, who became leader of Serbia after a coup ousting then leader of the Communist Party and President of Serbia, Ivan Stambolic, instantly evoked the 'Field of Blackbirds' battle of 1389 to muster support for the Serbian republic taking back full political control of the Kosovo province – largely made up of ethnic Albanians with a Serb minority. Indeed, Serbian TV recreated the battle to show the then King, Lazar, leading the Serbian army into a heroic battle to try and halt the advance of Islam claiming the Kosovan territory. Moreover, the "burns of King Lazar, who died at the battle of Kosovo, were paraded around Yugoslavia inspiring Serbs to reclaim their former glory" (The Death of Yugoslavia: 1995) upon Milosevic's election. Indeed, it is Milosevic's embrace of nationalism that is "blamed for all the wars of Yugoslavia" (The Death of Yugoslavia: 1995). As Mann states: "this collective memory, based on a real and recent historical core, then amplified by organic nationalism, (came to) boost… ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia – but only after serious political tensions had emerged" (Mann 2005: 362).

Essentially, the conflation of the nation, ethnically defined, and the state in nationalist ideology politicizes ethnicity and creates an objectified 'other'. Whereas traditionally ethnicity had "constituted the major distinguishing feature in all pre-national societies", the emergence of nationalism and the political ideal of the nation-state in the twentieth century (Mann 1999) demanded that the political and the national unit should be congruent (Gellner 2006), rendering ethnicity as a "strong sub-division with a loyalty of its own within established nations" (Hastings 1997: 3). Although this formulation was not new to European history, it did have "sinister implications for minorities in states that were suddenly defined as the nation-states of their respective ethnic majorities" (Hayden 1996: 787). Thus, as became evident in Yugoslavia, nationalist ideology created what Anderson refers to as "an imagined political community" linked to a state structure that politically and militarily buttressed its "inherent… limit(ations)" and "sovereign" status (Anderson 2006: 6). The idea of the 'nation' that was propagated and voted for was 'imagined' in the sense that it was impossible for all members of each respective Yugoslav republic to acquaint themselves with each other, yet, despite the inequality and exploitation that may exist in each nation, the idea of the nation came to be imagined as a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 2006: 7) amongst its members. The state apparatus, embodying this identity (Gellner 2006: 4), thus exercises sovereignty by enforcing the borders and maintaining sovereign order within the "inherently limited" nation state, as, indeed, "if there is no state, one cannot obviously ask whether or not its boundaries are congruent with the limits of nations" (Gellner 2006: 4). Thus, nationalist ideology's creation of an ethno-nationalist creed determined that formerly Yugoslav citizens living in a republic of which they did not form part of the ethnic (nationally determined) majority, along with any members of the majority who might try to support rights

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for the minorities (Hayden 1996: 790), were "national enemies", or 'others'.

The presumption of the nationalist politics within the Yugoslav republics was that "various Yugoslav peoples could not live together" (Hayden 1996: 788), thus the "Yugoslav idea" of an imagined Yugoslav community living together under a common state for the South Slavic people was considered abnormal. However, as Hayden and Petrovic document, from 1953 to 1981 almost all of the territories of Yugoslavia became increasingly heterogeneous (Petrovic 1987 cited in Hayden 2006: 788). Furthermore, accompanying this peaceful decline in the ethno-national majorities of the republics, there was also an "increase in the rates of inter-marriage between members of different national groups" (Hayden 1996: 788) which is usually thought to "indicate increasing assimilation (and) increasing integration (amongst) social groups" (Hayden 1996: 788). Indeed, these "mixed" marriages were particularly common between Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia-Hercegovina, and, perhaps most notably, between Serbs and Croats in Croatia. Indeed, it is worth considering the "increasingly close coexistence (of Serbs and Croats) in Croatia after 1945 despite the terrible massacres of Serbs by the fascist "Independent State of Croatia"" that nationalist ideology draws upon. It is the case that in areas where Serbs and Croats lived together, rates of intermarriage were high, as in the town of Petrinja, where approximately 25% of the marriages were "mixed", while in "Slavonija the percentage of mixed marriages climbed to 35% in the town of Pakrac" (Hayden 1996: 789).

Indeed, the mixed territories that existed peacefully were both "anomalous and threatening since they served as living disproof of nationalist ideologies" (Hayden 1996: 788). However, with the aim of constructing "homogeneous nation states (within the) heterogeneous territories" (Hayden 1996: 785), nationalist politicians came to "re(write) their respective republican constitutions to justify the state on the sovereignty of the ethnically defined nation in which others might be citizens but could not expect an equal right to participate in the control of the state" (Hayden 1996: 787). Essentially, the 'other' citizens who were not of the majority ethno-nation came to be discriminated against and counted as second class citizens. Inevitably, considering that "matching political borders precisely with ethnic homogeneity was impossible" (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 127), violence broke out in the portions of former Yugoslavia in which "newly disfavoured minorities (were) rejected inclusion in the state (which was) premised on hostility towards them" (Hayden 2008: 491). Thus, as has been made clear, not only did nationalist ideology feed off of "primordial" and other historical sentiments to establish a sense of community and radiate its moral legitimacy as a political pursuit, but it had to make existing heterogeneous communities unimaginable (Hayden 1996: 783). Hayden conceptualises this situation as the clash of a "prescriptive model of culture (culture-as-ideology) with what exists on the ground (culture-as-lived) but is not in accordance with the prescription" (Hayden 1996: 784). Thus nationalist ideology depicts not only a normative imperative of what the culture of the nation should be, but also subsumes a descriptive sense, thereby "reproducing assumptions of the way the world really is" (Hayden 1996: 784), which determines the cultural deviation as abnormal. Thus, in formal terms, the goal of nationalist ideology in Yugoslavia was to "implement an essentialist definition of the nation and its state in regions where the intermingled population formed living disproof of its validity" (Hayden 1996: 783).

Nationalism's fabrication of ethno-nationalist "imagined communities" created the ideological conditions for conflict between nationalising states and ethnic minority communities within the borders of the nationalising state; each 'sides' claims to the territory being both "morally plausible and achievable" (Mann 2005: 382) in the sense that "one constituted the majority population in the existing state; the other constituted a local majority in particular border districts, the weaker side supported by its homeland state next door" (Mann 2005: 382). The poignancy of ethno-nationalism in determining the locations of conflict is evident in the then President of Serbia's State Council, Borisav Jovic's, remark regarding Slovenia's declaration of independence from the Yugoslav Federation: "it was an ethnically pure state. No Serbs. We couldn't care less if it left Yugoslavia" (cited in Mann 2005: 376). Although Slovenia was inhabited by Serbs, albeit only a minor 2% of the Slovenian population (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 127), it didn't border Serbia, thus Jovic's remark elucidates the fact that although ethnicity was a major factor, "where the victims lived was (also) vital to heightening the salience of who they were" (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 131). Indeed, as Bloxham and Gerwarth note, Muslims in Serbia, where there was no direct challenge for territory, were "usually left untouched even as Serbian forces and Bosnian Serbs murdered and expelled Bosnian Muslims" (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 131). In contrast to Slovenia, the republic of Croatia, which declared independence on the same day, not only bordered Serbia but was also home to approximately 600, 000 Serbs – about 12% of the total Croatian population.

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Although Croatia's new draft constitution guaranteed equal rights for non-Croats, it also reduced the political rights of Serbs and Muslims (Mann 2005: 378). Whereas within Yugoslavia Serbs and Muslims had been defined as part of an "equal nation" in the republic of Croatia with national rights enforced by the federal institutions of Yugoslavia, the new constitution promised them the "lesser status of a minority like Czechs or Jews, who had enjoyed only individual civil rights under Yugoslav law" (Mann 2005: 378). Indeed, the laws governing citizenship are significant as it is a "mechanism through which the imagination of an ethno-national community is made manifest and actualised… the citizenship laws provide the legal means to exclude individuals from citizenship on ethnic grounds – in essence (it is) bureaucratic ethnic cleansing" (Hayden 1996 793-795). Naturally, the 600,000 Serbs living in the East of Croatia and in Krajina, which bordered Bosnia, feared for their well-being after the election of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman: a "revisionist historian who downplayed Serbian victims of the Ustasha and revived the symbolism from the fascist period" (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 127). Thus, the initial conflict in Croatia was a three-way conflict battling out nationalism's state-borders, involving a "nationalising state (Croatia) and a national minority (Serbs), aided by a homeland state (Serbia)… (of which) the second and third might fuse into a greater Serbia" (Mann 2005: 379). Unsurprisingly, considering the Serbs had control of the JNA army, this caused "Croatians who had resided with Serb neighbours (taking) to the road with whatever belongings they could carry" as former neighbours, infused by nationalist ideology, resorted to slaughtering known faces (Bloxham & Gerwarth 2011: 127).

In Bosnia-Hercegovina, attempts to define the state in such a way as to recognise the sovereignty of all of its constituent groups "based on the rule and self-management of the working class" (Hayden 1996: 791), without privileging any ethnicity, failed. As Yugoslavia collapsed "the Serb and Croat leaders in Bosnia proclaimed their own self-determining regions within the republic (that) quickly became quasi-states, closely linked to Serbia and Croatia, respectively, and were independent of the supposedly sovereign government of Bosnia-Hercegovina in Sarajevo" (Hayden 1996: 792). Thus, as in Croatia, nationalist ideology was the driving force towards the partitioning of Bosnia-Hercegovina into regions that were meant to be "ethnically pure" (Hayden 1996: 792).

To conclude, this essay has established that nationalist ideology contributed to the violence in the former Yugoslavia by politicising nationality and ethnicity and thus providing the moral, political and military impetus to ethnically cleanse areas of contested territories to create a 'fit' between the nation, ethnically defined, and the state. The demand for democracy in each of the republics to replace the unwanted communist rule of the Yugoslav Federation lead to the drive for independence and enabled the political will for the creation of individual sovereign nation-states to prosper. In effect, self-determination and autonomous governance, afforded by sovereignty and driven by nationalist ideology, brought on the civil wars and the ethnic cleansing that ensued (Hayden 1996: 792); with ethnic cleansing coming to represent a "manifestation of the incompatibility of the objectified or reified cultures at the base of the several nationalistic enterprises with the living cultures of the area" (Hayden 1996: 796). Essentially, the violence concerned the "forced unmixing of peoples whose continuing co-existence was counter to the political ideologies that won the free elections of the 1990s" (Hayden 1996: 783) and demonstrated the "brutal negation of social reality in order to reconstruct it" (Hayden 1996: 783).

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