

Theory and National Identity:
Yugoslavia in the Late 1940s and 1950s

By Michael Davis
Department of History
Franklin College of Arts and Sciences
University of Georgia
64vette@uga.edu

Supervised by Dr. Keith Langston
Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages
Franklin College of Arts and Sciences
University of Georgia
Langston@uga.edu

Abstract

During the late 1940s and 1950s, Tito's communist regime in Yugoslavia was forced to contemplate the recurring conundrum facing Belgrade: how to assimilate the various ethnic and religious factions into a greater Yugoslav identity. Ethno-religious tensions had provided opposition to Yugoslav identity since the nation's inception in 1918, and prior governments had compensated by asserting Orthodox Serbian preeminence at the expense of national minorities. Tito's regime established the most viable sense of a greater Yugoslav identity following its split with the Cominform in 1948, an event that forced the regime to contemplate how to draw upon the support of all its citizens in the face of Soviet and Western pressure.

As historians such as George Hoffman, Charles McVicker, Fred Neal, and Paul Shoup note, Tito's regime devoted considerable effort towards generating a body of theory to underlie the new Yugoslav identity. This was accomplished primarily through theoretical positions regarding domestic policies and foreign diplomacy. This paper will focus upon the theoretical positions (though not actual implementation) regarding the withering away of the state and party, rejection of collectivization of agriculture and recognition of the peasantry, socialist democracy, and nonalignment during the Cold War. The importance of these positions in reducing tensions between the ethno-religious factions will be discussed in context of the larger struggle to establish a coherent Yugoslav identity.

From its inception, the Yugoslav government faced a conundrum regarding national identity. Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, a new kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was created, centered in the Serbian capital of Belgrade. The Great Powers created the kingdom, later renamed Yugoslavia, as an extension of the previously existing Serbian state, inherently creating tension between the politically preeminent Serbs and the ethnic minorities who had expected the right of self-determination after centuries of Austrian rule. Serbian dominance only served to fuel and solidify the nationalistic aspirations of the Croats, Slovenes, Albanians, and other ethnic minorities—aspirations that conflicted with the goal of establishing a Yugoslav national identity that transcended ethnic identity. As the minorities agitated for greater autonomy, the Serbian elite became increasingly dedicated to maintaining its power. Thus, prior to the German invasion in 1941, a greater Yugoslav image was not cultivated; rather, the government viewed the state as a “Greater Serbia.”¹ Under the German occupation, the Croats were granted a nominally independent state while the royalist Chetniks remained concerned with maintaining Serbian identity and political preeminence.² Rather than providing a united front against the Nazi invaders, the political elites of both ethnicities accentuated ethnic differences.

The establishment of Yugoslav national identity during the interwar period was further hindered by religious tension and economic disparity throughout the country; these factors meant that, following the war, the Communists emerged as the only political force disengaged enough from ethnic and religious loyalties in order to forge a new Yugoslav identity. Though the Communist Party had existed in Yugoslavia prior to the war, it became a potent and legal political force only through the military success of Tito’s Partisans. In 1945 the communist

¹ Wilson, Duncan, *Tito’s Yugoslavia*, Cambridge University: New York, 1979, 9.

² *Ibid*, 22.

vision of Yugoslavia presented a new potential identity: “bourgeois Yugoslavia,”³ dominated by the Serbian royalty, was seen as dead, and a new socialist nation, in alliance with the Soviet Union, would be born. Tito, a Croat himself, did not envision a Yugoslavia split along ethnic or religious lines, but rather one dominated by the proletariat. Following the end of the war, the Allies recognized Tito’s regime as the Federated People’s Republic of Yugoslavia and accepted the abdication of the king, officially ending the old Kingdom and the national identity (or lack thereof) associated with it. During the late 1940s and throughout the 50s, Tito’s regime projected a new national identity predicated upon the eclipsing of ethnic or religious loyalties in favor of loyalty to the central state, socialist policies on the domestic front, and nonalignment during the Cold War. This paper analyzes the development of this new identity within the context of official Yugoslav political theory.

Between 1945 and 1948, Tito’s regime positioned Yugoslavia as a “people’s democracy” at home and a “most loyal satellite”⁴ of Moscow abroad. Tito and the communists were “unshakable in [their] devotion to the Soviet Union, which [they] praised as a model for solving all of Yugoslavia’s problems.”⁵ During this period of communist consolidation, a form of federalism was instituted, creating six autonomous republics and two autonomous provinces; however, decision-making was still concentrated in Belgrade and the system remained highly centralized. The reduction of Serbian domination within the new system is notable.⁶ Reduction in Serbian preeminence was critical to fostering a new identity in which all ethnicities were equal; by promoting equality for all ethnic groups, the regime hoped that the nationalistic

³ Pavlowitch, Stevan, *Tito: Yugoslavia’s Great Dictator, A Reassessment*, Ohio State University: Columbus, 1992, 30.

⁴ Lees, Lorraine M., *Keeping Tito Afloat: The United States, Yugoslavia, and the Cold War*, Penn State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1997, 1.

⁵ Pavlowitch, *A Reassessment*, 28.

⁶ Hoffman, George W. and Fred Warner Neal, *Yugoslavia and the New Communism*, Twentieth Century Fund: New York, 1962, 82.

aspirations of the minorities would be lessened. Domestic policies in the three years immediately following the war were based upon the Soviet model; in fact, Tito's regime "surpassed other states in Eastern Europe in its adoption of Soviet planning and development models."⁷ In the face of rising tensions with the West, Tito's regime became increasingly dependent upon Moscow for support. However, tension developed between Belgrade and Moscow, culminating in Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform on June 28, 1948.

Following the expulsion from the Cominform, the Yugoslav Communist leadership faced an identity crisis. Previously, they had based their ideology solely upon loyalty to Moscow and thus "suffered a mental shock [...] The [Cominform] Resolution was 'the end of the world.'"⁸ Once Moscow denounced them, the leaders of Tito's regime quickly began to formulate a new theoretical basis, eventually known as Titoism, a foundation for their existence as a communist nation outside of the communist bloc. In addition, this theory was used to solidify the Yugoslav national image while continuing to check the power of ethnicity and religion. In the domestic sphere, the new theory centered upon such themes as the decentralization of the federal government, the role of the state and Party, and the collectivization of agriculture.

Decentralization of the federalist system began soon after the Cominform Resolution. Decentralization was seen as the first step in the "withering away" of the state. Yugoslav theory believed that a state was "not really socialist unless it is in the process of withering away, and the withering away 'arises as the fundamental and decisive question of the socialist system.'"⁹ Though decentralization of the federal government translated to more responsibilities for the republic and local governments, the process was "not linked to the concept of increased freedom for the republics or greater rights for the nationalities. On the contrary, the theory of reforms

⁷ Lees, *Keeping Tito Afloat*, 10.

⁸ Hoffman and Neal, *New Communism*, 140.

⁹ *Ibid*, 163.

foresaw quite a different end: the reduction of state interference at all levels of the economy and the society.”¹⁰ In effect, they believed that the “dictatorship of the proletariat, with its ownership and management of the means of production, its large state apparatus, and its arbitrary use of what Lenin called the ‘organs of suppression’”¹¹ must not be permanent. The Yugoslavs believed that their newly decentralized system, far less controlling than the prior federalist system, would create “an enlightened and responsible society unencumbered by the nationalistic prejudices of the past.”¹² Decentralization would lessen tensions among the various nationalities, most notably between the Serbs and Croats, by reducing the competition for power that existed under the federalist system.

Soviet theory also embraces the idea of “withering away,” though it diverges from the Yugoslav position that maintains the process must start immediately for a state to be truly socialist. As with most Yugoslav theoretical positions immediately following 1948, the initial articulation of the need for immediate withering away of the state began as a criticism of the Soviet Union which, under Stalin, had deviated from true Marxism-Leninism by establishing a communist bureaucracy that in turn transformed the dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship over the proletariat.¹³ The example of the Soviet Union confirmed the need for the withering away process to prevent the entrenchment of a communist bureaucracy. By rejecting the establishment of a strong bureaucracy, the Yugoslavs differentiated themselves both from the Soviet Union and from the West: as mentioned above, the new system aspired to create an enlightened and responsible society where a bureaucracy would not be needed to implement policies. Furthermore, the Yugoslavs viewed both Soviet and bourgeois bureaucracies as

¹⁰ Shoup, Paul, *Communism and the Yugoslav National Question*, Columbia University: New York, 1968, 185.

¹¹ Hoffman and Neal, *New Communism*, 163.

¹² Shoup, *National Question*, 186.

¹³ Neal, Fred Warner, *Titoism in Action: The Reforms in Yugoslavia after 1948*, University of California: Berkeley, 1958, 7.

inherently opposed to the true interests of the workers. Thus, by 1950 the regime declared that legal control and management of all economic organizations should be given to the workers of each individual enterprise.¹⁴

Edvard Kardelj, one of Tito's closest associates, explained the withering away process as necessarily beginning in the areas of state economic functions, education, cultural activities, and social services, whereas the police and the army, as instruments of power against anti-socialist forces both at home and abroad, would wither away far more slowly. By transferring economic and cultural matters from the federal government's direct control to the republics, the regime continued a policy of pacification of the ethnic and religious groups within the country. By allowing them to make their own decisions in such matters, the federal government calculated that one ethnic or religious group would not dominate the direction of the entire nation and hence undermine the willingness of other ethnicities or religions to follow Belgrade's lead. Ensuring that the minorities were satisfied was considered critical enough that the Yugoslav Constitution declared in Article 13 that "the national minorities in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia enjoy the right and protection of their cultural development and the free use of their language."¹⁵ Thus began the Yugoslav drive towards decentralization and "socialist democracy."

Socialist democracy, and its relationship to the role of the Communist Party, formed another important component of the new Yugoslav theory. As Ranković stated in 1952, a "society 'reaching the socialist path of withering away of the state' must inevitably be concerned with freedom and human rights,"¹⁶ an acknowledgement that some political democracy is necessary for socialism to occur. However, the Yugoslav leadership drew a clear distinction

¹⁴ McVicker, Charles, *Titoism: Pattern for International Communism*, St. Martin's Press: New York, 1957, 33.

¹⁵ Shoup, *National Question*, 103.

¹⁶ Hoffman and Neal, *New Communism*, 168.

between socialist democracy and Western democracy, the latter of which is a “democracy of a minority, of a ruling class [...in which the] majority has not the necessary economic, social, intellectual, and cultural resources to allow it to manifest itself fully and make decisions freely.”¹⁷ Multiple political parties were viewed as unnecessary and even detrimental to socialist democracy; instead, the Yugoslavs would have “direct and mass democracy” once the withering away of the state allowed the masses to make political decisions for themselves.¹⁸ The mediums through which this would occur were the Socialist Alliance (an umbrella group dominated by communist interests), workers’ councils, citizen-action committees, and direct citizen management of institutions, including schools and hospitals.¹⁹ Hence, the Yugoslavs portrayed themselves as truly democratic and fair, implying an identity of an integrated and democratic society in which citizens played an active role in the decision-making process. Yugoslav theory also celebrated the important role of the individual in a socialist state; Kardelj recalled, “socialism had been born precisely to liberate the working man from every tendency to subordinate the interest of the individual to a pretended superior interest.”²⁰ The role of the Party, through the Socialist Alliance, remained a critical aspect of this vision of socialist democracy.

Similar to the withering away of the state, the Communist Party should also wither away according to Yugoslav theory. As the new theory was slowly being promulgated in the late 1940s and early 1950s, even Tito declared that the Party would wither away along with the state. However, as the Party’s withering away would dramatically weaken the regime, Tito abruptly pulled back and declared in 1952 that “there can be no withering away or winding up of the League of Communists until the last class enemy has been immobilized, until the broadest body

¹⁷ Ibid, 169.

¹⁸ Ibid, 170.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ McVicker, *Titoism*, 298.

of our citizens are socialist in outlook;”²¹ in fact, the Party would have to grow stronger in the interim period. Official Yugoslav theory, however, continued to declare that the Party would ultimately wither away: Kardelj explained that this would occur through a gradual merger of the Party’s power “into the direct power of the working masses themselves.”²² Again, the giving of power directly to the people was the ultimate goal of the withering away process. Interestingly, however, in advocating for the Party to wither away, the Yugoslavs employed the same logic for delaying this process as did the Soviets. Although differentiation from the Soviets remained a cornerstone of the Yugoslav identity, the two nonetheless remained very similar in some respects.

One domestic issue in which the Yugoslavs made a clear break from Soviet policy was in the area of agriculture. Marx envisioned the proletariat revolution as occurring in highly industrialized societies and thus communism as advanced by the Soviets was focused entirely on industry; agriculture should be collectivized, but the main focus remained upon the industrial sector. However, Yugoslavia was not an industrial society, and the large peasant population fiercely resisted efforts to collectivize agriculture. By 1953, with 61% of the population still employed in agriculture, forestry, or fishing, the Yugoslav government had completely abandoned attempts at collectivization, realizing that such measures would not produce the needed level of output to feed the nation nor would it instill respect for socialism amongst the peasantry, a necessary component to total socialization.²³ Unlike their Soviet counterparts, the Yugoslavs declared the peasant an integral part of society, and abandonment of collectivization was heralded as a sign of the regime’s understanding of and empathy with the people. Having the support of the peasant population had been a priority for the Communists since the German

²¹ Hoffman and Neal, *New Communism*, 167.

²² Ibid.

²³ McVicker, *Titoism*, 107.

invasion. A majority of the Partisans during the war were peasants, and during the mid-1950s the government recognized “the private peasant as the mainstay of agriculture and as such of the economy.”²⁴

This recognition of the peasantry became an integral part of the new Yugoslav identity. Under both the old kingdom and the Soviet-inspired people’s democracy in the 1940s, the ruling elite largely dismissed the peasants. During the 50s, the peasants began to be portrayed as an integral part of the nation and, as such, free from forced collectivization measures found throughout Eastern Europe. This departure from Soviet practice represented the strongest attempt by the regime to gain the support of the peasants. By presenting itself as the protector and friend of the peasants, the regime hoped to weaken the peasants’ traditional support for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, rival political powers, without engaging in a direct attack upon the organized religions. Similarly, the official government stance towards religion stated that while religious activities on the part of Socialist Alliance members were frowned upon, religious feelings were of private concern.²⁵ However, the regime did persecute any religious organization that constituted a political threat to the government, relying upon the theory that the regime, and it alone, represented the interests of the people.

The domestic and international identities crafted by the Yugoslav leadership overlapped in the issue of national socialism. During the early 1950s, the Yugoslavs came to be the spokesmen for this movement, which championed “independent paths to socialism.”²⁶ The Yugoslav position asserted that socialism naturally developed differently in various countries and time periods: it was natural for different nations to pursue different paths and thus the domination of the Soviet Union could not be justified by communist ideology. In support of this

²⁴ Hoffman and Neal, *New Communism*, 279.

²⁵ Neal, *Titoism*, 62.

²⁶ Hoffman and Neal, *New Communism*, 157.

position, the Yugoslavs cited Lenin's belief in the uneven development of capitalism and assumed that socialism developed in a similar fashion.²⁷ Furthermore, the Yugoslavs argued that Lenin had "declared the equality of socialist states, and it was the Soviet Union's 'imperialist denial' of this equality"²⁸ that had forced the Yugoslavs to break with the Cominform. Of course, the Yugoslavs had not chosen to leave the Cominform but had rather been expelled, a reality that, as their national image was constructed, was generally forgotten. The Yugoslavs were correct, however, in that their refusal to follow blindly the dictates of Moscow had resulted in the break. By advocating national socialism, the regime presented itself domestically as the protector of its people while presenting the people themselves as a dynamic nation capable of mastering its own destiny. On the international scene, the Yugoslavs presented themselves as having made a return to "true" Marxism-Leninism and as leading the way for other socialist nations to break free from Moscow's control.

The new national identity was also predicated upon a new vision of Yugoslav diplomacy. Prior to World War II, the kingdom of Yugoslavia was dependent upon Western support. Immediately after the War, Yugoslavia followed Moscow's dictates and was, in fact, the most ardent supporter of the Soviet position, earning it the West's hostility.²⁹ Following the Cominform Resolution, however, the Yugoslav identity as Moscow's loyal satellite was no longer advantageous to the regime. Yet a complete realignment of Yugoslavia's position was slow in coming. First, the regime gradually increased its criticism of the Soviet Union, then reached out to the West for economic aid, and then ultimately became a proponent of the nonalignment movement.

²⁷ Neal, *Titoism*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Lees, *Keeping Tito Afloat*, 31.

The sudden split with Moscow was a shock to the Yugoslav leadership, yet it held potential for domestically solidifying the regime's position. Ultimately, the regime was able to portray itself as the defenders of the people against the aggression of Moscow by playing upon patriotism and tapping into a general fear of Soviet military power.³⁰ Even those citizens who had previously opposed the communist regime were then forced to support Tito's government as it was the only barrier standing between the Yugoslav people and the Red Army.³¹ Furthermore, the appearance of a concrete external threat in the form of the Soviet Union tended to close the ranks of the Yugoslav citizens, strengthening Yugoslav national identity while making internal ethnic or religious differences less relevant.

Due to practical needs following the Soviet and Eastern European embargo against Yugoslavia, the regime turned to America for aid. As this was a major policy shift from the previous three years, the regime was forced to rethink its underlying theory for foreign relations. In late 1950, Tito reversed earlier statements and declared that the USSR was "a menacing threat to our country and world peace,"³² which represented a grave military danger to Yugoslavia. Tito then declared NATO, once seen as an aggressive force, as "the logical consequence of Soviet Policy."³³ The regime's sharp criticism of the Soviet Union and subsequent warming to the West contributed to the image of Yugoslavia as a free and dynamic society.

Independence was the core of the new Yugoslav policy. Throughout the early 1950s while ties with the West were strengthening, Tito repeatedly insisted upon dealing with the West on his terms, not theirs, declaring, "[we] did not bow to the Soviets; ...how could we then, bow

³⁰ Pavlowitch, *A Reassessment*, 58.

³¹ Hoffman and Neal, *New Communism*, 143.

³² Neal, *Titoism*, 253.

³³ *Ibid.*

to the West.”³⁴ During the period of normalization with Moscow following Stalin’s death, Tito again insisted upon maintaining the independence of the regime. This insistence played strongly into the Yugoslav national image, giving it a patriotic pride in being free from domination from any outside power. This contributed to Tito’s support for the non-alignment movement. During various state visits to African and Asian nations, including Nasser’s Egypt, Tito “proclaimed his opposition to any and all ideological and political blocs [... and] adherence to an active nonaligned policy, designed to promote genuine peace and security for all nations of the world.”³⁵ By allying with India’s Nehru, Indonesia’s Sukarno, and Egypt’s Nasser, Tito positioned Yugoslavia as a force for peace in the world. Adopting the nonalignment movement as a cornerstone of Yugoslav foreign policy, the regime declared its continued independence from both Cold War blocs. This allowed the regime to maintain the image of an enlightened and responsible society capable of transcending ethnic, religious, or ideological differences.

This foreign policy had a theoretical basis in “positive neutralism,” which Tito explained to Eisenhower as meaning that “neutralism did not imply passivity but ‘meant not taking sides.’”³⁶ However, the regime also positioned Yugoslavia as “the bridge between East and West.”³⁷ This stance had important implications for the Yugoslav identity. First, it reaffirmed Yugoslavia’s independence from Cold War politics. Secondly, it provided domestic support for holding the nation together amongst the competing interests of the various ethnic and religious groups that looked to outside powers, such as the Vatican or Moscow.

Thus, the theoretical basis for the new Yugoslav national identity was centered primarily upon new domestic policies and an actively neutral foreign policy. Throughout these policies,

³⁴ Lees, *Keeping Tito Afloat*, 83.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 147.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 235.

³⁷ Neal, *Titoism*, 275.

ensuring the suppression of ethnic or religious identities in favor of the Yugoslav identity remained at the forefront. The transition from being little more than a Soviet satellite before the Cominform Resolution to an independent, “enlightened and responsible” society capable of directing its own path towards socialism followed a circuitous route that continuously developed throughout the 1950s. The theoretical positions stated in this paper represent the general tone of Yugoslav theory during the early to middle years of the decade; these positions could and did change to meet new challenges. Furthermore, these positions did not always translate well into actual policy as Yugoslavia struggled to feed its people, maintain its independence, and continue on the path towards complete socialization. As seen during the 1990s, the Yugoslav national identity created by the Tito regime ultimately did not succeed in subsuming ethnic and religious identities.

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