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Yugoslavia

Non-alignment

In any discussion of the social, political or economic aspects of “Yugoslavia” as a definable entity, it has to be borne in mind that as a separate state Yugoslavia had a history of less than seventy-five years. That history can be broadly divided into three parts: as a monarchy and regency from its improbable foundation after World War I in 1918 until 1941; as a territory upon which a significant part of World War II was played out from 1941 to 1945; and, following the victory of Tito’s Partisans, as a one-party socialist state from 1945 until the breaking-away and break-up of its constituent parts in the 1990s.

It remains one of the saddest ironies in the history of conflict in the twentieth century that Yugoslavia, of all those communist states of Eastern Europe which transformed in its penultimate decade, was the one that had demonstrated the greatest degree of liberalization in its social, political, and economic structure and development, yet was the one that disintegrated amid the greatest violence and loss of life.

Tito

The period from 1948 when Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform until the death of President Tito in 1980 has been variously described as the “Yugoslav experiment,” the “third way,” or, eponymously, as “Titoism.” The two major planks of Yugoslav policy under Tito were these: (1) nationally, self-managing socialism or workers’ self-management with a subsequent limited accommodation of market economics and (2) internationally, the concept and practice of non-alignment, a movement characterized by the institution of a foreign policy and related defense policy independent of the individual or collective loyalties of states aligned with one or other of the two power blocs which represented the so-called “Cold War”.

One factor which may have been significant in this assertion of national independence was the multinational makeup of Yugoslavia, federating a variety of southern Slavonic peoples (plus ethnic Albanians and Hungarians) who had historically and traditionally been on either side of the Habsburg/Ottoman “fault-line.” A policy of non-alignment more generally could therefore be seen as a unifying element in Tito’s promotion of a Yugoslavian national identity.

Yugoslavia became one of the leading and initially most influential of a group of non-aligned states, either transformed or newly formed, which came together in a formal sense in 1961. By that time Soviet and Eastern bloc attitudes toward and interest in Yugoslavia were softening following the death of Stalin. At the same time the United States and the West were rather more keen (for reasons of self-interest rather than ideology) on engaging with Yugoslavia—an approach which Tito on subsequent occasions skillfully used to attract economic support and indeed military aid without significantly compromising his political neutrality in international terms.

Following its expulsion from the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau) for alleged disagreements over Soviet foreign policy, there loomed the prospect of Yugoslavia facing the world on its own and being potentially vulnerable in terms of its national defense. Yugoslavia’s understandable perception of itself as the only one of the Eastern European states to have liberated itself during World War II as a result of the particular terrain-based campaign fought by the Partisans

was unlikely to be as effective under a different threat. And although the lessons learned from that campaign were always in Tito's mind, it was not until the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 that these were fully considered in the form of local territorial defense units and the concept of "total national defense." Yugoslavia's vulnerability was to some extent lessened in October 1949 by its election for two years, despite Soviet opposition, onto one of the non-permanent seats on the U.N. Security Council. This not only provided Yugoslavia with a forum to publicize its treatment by the Soviet Union, but also helped to highlight the international political impact of new states in the "Third World," and the potential for the creation of a non-aligned movement. Yugoslavia was therefore more receptive to the potential of a different approach to foreign policy in a dangerously divided world.

New Alliances

An early move by Yugoslavia to forge new alliances was the Balkan Pact, an echo of the abortive plan for a Balkan Federation, initially supported by and then dropped by the Soviet Union in 1947–1948. This pact involved Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey, and it resulted in a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1953 and a military agreement in the following year. But the Pact was effectively ended by the subsequent dispute between the other two signatories over the Cyprus question.

The seeds of the wider non-aligned movement were sown at an international conference sponsored by five southern Asian countries (i.e., Indonesia, Burma, Ceylon, India, and Pakistan) held at Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 and were given wider credible impetus by the subsequent efforts of three presidents: Tito of Yugoslavia, Nehru of India, and Nasser of Egypt. These eventually resulted in the first formal conference of non-aligned states, which was held, significantly, at the Yugoslav capital city of Belgrade during the first week of September 1961. In preparation for such an event Tito had spent part of the previous three years visiting various Asian and African countries. Of the twenty-five countries fully represented at the Belgrade Conference, eleven were Asian, and eleven were African; Cuba was also represented, but the only two members from Europe were Cyprus and Yugoslavia itself. A total of twenty-seven resolutions were passed, covering independence and associated rights, peace and disarmament, and economic development.

By the time the second conference was held at Cairo in October 1964, the worlds had witnessed a spate of newly created independent states in Africa, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the increasing influence of China. The membership had grown to forty-seven, and while the issue of colonialism and post-colonialism formed the major part of the declaration, Yugoslavia maintained the initiative for promoting peace and development through the United Nations.

Six years elapsed before the third conference, held at Lusaka, Zambia, in September 1970, which was effectively a review of both the progress and any violations of the original principles, put a greater emphasis upon issues of economic development.

Three more such conferences were held before Tito died in 1980: Algiers in September 1973, Colombo in August 1976, and Havana in September 1979. The Algiers summit saw the number of member countries increase to seventy-five (which, as one commentator pointed out, was two-thirds of the membership of the United Nations itself). There was a feeling that this number was too great for effective executive expression, and as a result a Co-ordinating Bureau was formally established at Colombo with a membership of twenty-five, including Yugoslavia. It was empowered to take action

on behalf of the overall membership, but only on the basis of a generally prevailing consensus. Straddling these three conferences was the dispute between Yugoslavia and Cuba over the nature of the movement; their leaders were the only two surviving from the creation of the movement, and whereas Tito had consistently adhered to the principle of equidistance between the two major power blocs, Castro, was more pro-Soviet in approach. By the time of the Havana conference, Castro's home ground, Tito, although already ailing, had been lobbying widely and heavily to keep the movement that he had started on course. At the event, a potentially damaging split was avoided by concentrating the declaration on economic issues and the role of the United Nations in furthering the cause.

The death of Tito in the following May did not affect Yugoslavia's support for non-alignment along the lines which Tito had laid out, and Yugoslavia was present at the subsequent conferences throughout the 1980s (host of the 1989 conference) before the country's demise. To celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the movement, Belgrade was chosen as the venue in recognition of its having hosted the movement's first conference, and also out of respect for and in memory of Tito, still regarded by many as a, if not the, founding father of the movement.

The demolition of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the traditional power blocs, threatened to diminish the impact of the movement. However, it has continued to convene regularly into the twenty-first century, and indeed its membership has grown to 116 nations. The vast majority of these are from Africa and Asia, plus representation from the Pacific, the Caribbean and from Central America. With the loss of Yugoslavia Cyprus remains the only European country represented, and the movement is as much a voice for the developing world as for non-alignment per se.

Benefits of Non-Alignment

The question to be asked, therefore, is whether the non-aligned movement needed Yugoslavia more or less than Yugoslavia needed the non-aligned movement. There can be little doubt that Yugoslavia's contribution to the movement was immense. The numerical predominance of the African and Asian countries in the movement inevitably meant that their priorities were focused on the needs of the Third World rather than on being able to influence East-West relations. They were, somewhat surprisingly, disengaged by lack of either motivation or invitation when the time came for international action in the context of Yugoslavia's disintegration; but there was recognition of Yugoslavia's unique position as a European state in being able to coordinate and represent their own concerns in wider world forums.

Yugoslavia, however, can be seen to have benefited from the international perception of its leading role in the movement. It may, for example, have been a factor in 1968 at the time of the Soviet Union's move against Czechoslovakia: the threat of a similar move against Yugoslavia was less credible, given the status which Yugoslavia had acquired internationally. Significantly, that Yugoslavia was closely identified with and participated in the Helsinki Process from 1975 onwards.

In conclusion, therefore, it can be said that, whereas the non-aligned movement itself did not entirely fulfill its considerable potential, it enabled Yugoslavia, instead of being observed simply as a mildly interesting and individual experiment in an alternative approach to socio-political and economic development, to acquire a wider international visibility and audience, which it might not have achieved otherwise.

See also Cold War: Ending (1987–1991); Neutralism and Nonalignment; and Yugoslavia, Causes of Integration and Disintegration.

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