The Role of Religion in the Yugoslav War

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Introduction

In the early 1990s, the Southeastern corner of Europe exploded in a firestorm of war and violence between the different republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Civil war broke out as tensions flared between different religious and ethnic groups, and the republics that comprised the nation declared their independence. Starting with Slovenia's initial declaration and succeeded by similar decrees in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and elsewhere, one nation was transformed into seven at the expense of nearly a decade of violence. According to the International Center for Transitional Justice (2009), the conflict included "widespread attacks against civilians, population expulsions, systematic rape and the use of concentration camps." Most of the massacres occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo and, by the war's end, "over 140,000 people were killed and almost 4 million others displaced" across the region (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2009).

In addition to the violence between the armies of each republic, massive genocidal and ethnic cleansing campaigns were executed by makeshift soldiers who were normal citizens only a few years prior. In the case of the Srebrenica Massacre, for example, "more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were systematically massacred and buried in mass graves, thousands of women, children and elderly people were forcibly deported, [and] a large number of women were raped" (*Remembering Srebrenica*, n.d.). This makes the atrocity the worst in Europe since World War II and highlights the severity of the conflict, as examples like Srebrenica were not unique when it comes to the crimes that the explosion of the "*Balkan keg*" brought about.

This paper will examine the importance that religion had in the development towards war and how religion and religious identity were used as tools by political actors to breed mistrust and incite violence. By examining the historical significance of religion in the region, we will identify how the close association of religious identity with ethnic identity divided and polarized different religious groups against one another for several centuries. The paper will then explore how the polarization of these groups was compounded by economic and cultural differences, which further exacerbated the tensions and how these tensions translated into historical conflict over the course of the 20th century. Finally, commentary on the historical pressures in the Balkans will be unified with a discussion of some of the rhetoric and political actions that immediately preceded the war to determine how differences in religious and ethnic identity were used as motivators for war and how the political tensions between the different Yugoslav republics increased as a result.

Historical Perspective on Religious and Ethnic Divides

In order to comprehend the conflict in greater detail, it is important first to understand more about the region as a whole and the religious divides that define it. Perhaps the most important concept to grasp when examining the Yugoslav Civil War is that religion in the former Yugoslavia is almost synonymous with ethnicity. In the *Slavonic and East European Review* nearly 30 years before the war's onset, David Dyker describes the religious and political realities between the Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats of the area. Dyker highlights that nearly all Serbs are Eastern Orthodox in their practice of Christianity, that Croats are ubiquitously Catholic, and that Bosniaks are almost completely Muslim (Dyker, 1972). In fact, the extent to which religion defines ethnicity can be found in some of the earliest censuses that Dyker showcases in his article. In an Austro-Hungarian census from 1879, Bosniaks were not even identified by their ethnic status, but by their religious one. Using the term "ethnic Moslem" as a racial identifier, the language of the census underscores the close affiliation that religion and

ethnicity have in the land of the South Slavs. This affiliation was so strong that changing one form of identity might constitute changing the other. In the *Austrian History Yearbook* of 1967, Michael Petrovich details that "religion was not so much a matter of private conscience as of one's public identity. In some cases, the identification between religion and nationality was so great that a religious conversion automatically entailed a change of nationality, in the eyes of others if not in those of the convert himself" (Petrovich, 1967). In this way, religion and ethnicity were one and the same in Yugoslavia for generations before the war began.

This complete concordance between the two identities is not only a unique and interesting distinction, but also serves an important role in addressing how the tensions between the different groups grew to such elevated levels, and how the ethno-religious groups of the Balkans often perceived themselves as having less in common with one another, despite a shared language and frequently a shared nationality. It is first important to note that despite strong ties between the constructs of religion and ethnicity in the Balkans, the interrelation of these two elements of identity and the extent to which their relationship has been a catalyst for armed conflict are nuanced and ever-changing over the course of history. Indeed, people of distinct ethnicities and religions have coexisted rather peacefully in the region for centuries despite the intermittent conflict that is to be discussed. According to Kanchan Chandra's constructivist viewpoint of ethnicity—which is predicated on the belief that "ethnic identities are not singular, nor are they fixed"—the kind of separation between the different religious and ethnic identities of Yugoslavs was not an eternal and undying phenomenon. Instead, Chandra argues that identities like the aforementioned can change, and underscores examples where they have—sometimes very drastically (Chandra, 2012). In all cases, she attributes these changes to complementary changes in the environment, perception, or thoughts of the people in question. In essence, racial and ethnic categories are created through experience and by influences over the course of history.

With this point in mind, it is imperative to examine how the seemingly inseparable racial and ethnic identities of Yugoslavia were actually shaped and molded into their contemporary existence. According to historian Florian Bieber, much of the polarization between the groups may be attributed to historical developments in the region. He highlights, for example, a specific instance in the 14th century when the height of the medieval Serbian state was reached. At this time, Serbian king Stefan Dusan controlled a large portion of the Balkans. Soon, however, his empire was destroyed and fragmented by the arrival of the Ottomans, who defeated the Serbs in the Battle of Kosovo Polje (Bieber & Dastalovski, 2003). This battle, to nearly all Serb nationals, signified the beginning of the unjust Ottoman conquest of their lands. For these Serbs, the arrival of the Ottomans began a period of repression and maltreatment, something for which a longstanding begrudging attitude would be held. Dimitrije Djordjevich describes how the day on which the battle was fought has even taken on its own national symbolism as Vidovdan, or St. Vitus's Day, and has remained part of the Serbian national consciousness since the day that the battle took place. He highlights how "generations of Serbs and historians divided the national past into two periods: before and after the Kosovo Battle" (Djordjevich, 1999). The reverence with which this battle is remembered signifies the prevalence of a strong anti-Ottoman sentiment that concentrated itself in Serbia for centuries.

This mindset against the Ottomans would also be translated into a hatred of the Islamic religion that the Ottomans brought with them. For many Serbs, "Turkish" and "Muslim" were synonymous. This is made evident by the term "Turcin," which was formerly used to denote members of the Islamic religious community despite the fact that there is no significant evidence linking Yugoslavia's Muslims to ethnic Turkish ancestry (Dyker, 1972). Instead, as Dyker describes, the term derives from the close association that Serbs held between Ottomans and those ethnic Slavs who converted to Islam upon the arrival of the Ottomans. Many ethnic Bosniaks, who at the time of Ottoman conquest were part of an independent Bosnian Church, were already perceived as heretics of both the Catholic and Orthodox churches for their differences in belief. This group of Slavs did not identify with many of the religious ideologies of either institution, and thus soon latched on to Islam when it was presented to

them as an alternative (Dyker, 1972). Many other adherents of Catholicism and Orthodoxy also became Muslim due to the benefits of doing so under Islamic law and with hopes of stepping up the Ottoman power pyramid. Those who converted paid a lesser tax and had more positions of advancement in the regional governments and martial hierarchy available to them, so conversion was widespread (Slack, 2001).

With past heretics and a mass of formerly Catholic and Orthodox adherents joining this new faith of the incoming conquerors, the Slavic churches were pitted against Islam. This spelled trouble moving forward, as these churches played an important role as "cultural and quasi-political institution[s]" (Perica, 2002) in the governance of ideologies among their adherents. By serving as "the historic repository of nationhood, national values, and quite often, as the savior of a nation's very existence" (Radu, 1998), these churches were able to shape the national dialogue for many centuries to come and keep incidents like Vidovdan and the maltreatment of the Serbian people by the Muslim Ottomans at the forefront of the national consciousness. In this way, they were able to shape the divide between the Muslim and Christian groups and exacerbate the tensions felt on both sides.

The interreligious conflict was not limited exclusively to Christians and Muslims, either. Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbians also had extensive historical differences that pitted them against one another. According to Slack (2001), "From the ninth century, the Church of Rome brought religion, education, and literature in the Latin alphabet to Croatia and Dalmatia, while the Church of Byzantium in Constantinople brought Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the Cyrillic alphabet to Bulgaria, Macedonia, and eventually most of Serbia." These two churches set up important differences in the cultures of the two regions which evolved into marked changes in the economies of these areas. The north—comprised mainly of Croatia and Slovenia—had a Latinic alphabet and was predominantly Catholic, which fostered close ties to contemporary European powers like Italy as they engaged in the Industrial Revolution. Serbia and the rest of the south, however, were relatively underdeveloped with closer ties to antiquated Russia through the Cyrillic alphabet and Eastern Orthodoxy. As a result, Croatia

was significantly more economically successful than Serbia (Bertsch, 1977). Michael Radu postulates that "perhaps the primary source of political conflict in Yugoslavia [in the time of war] results from regional and, hence, ethnic inequalities in the goods and services produced and consumed by the different peoples" (Radu, 1998). In other words, not only was the eventual split of Croatia and Slovenia from the rest of Yugoslavia politically damaging, but it also endangered Serbian economic success. Thus, the different economic and cultural environments set up by the respective churches of these two regions further polarized them.

History of Conflict in the 20th Century

This extensive history of religious tensions also transcends the antiquated past into the more modern day. An example of continuing pressures in more recent times can be found when examining the events that led up to the outbreak of World War I. After the Ottomans were driven out of the Balkans in the early 20th century, an independent Serbian state was created. Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia, however, were incorporated in the Austro-Hungarian Empire ("Yugoslavia," 2014). This incorporation was relatively well-received by most Croats, as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was favorable to them given that its population was 90% Catholic (Bloy, 2013). Serbs, on the other hand, felt wronged by this apparent disregard of their perpetual strife against the Ottomans and the role that they played in driving them out. For nationalistic organizations like The Black Hand, Bosnia and Croatia were Serbian lands and they should have been integrated into the Serbian state when Ottoman property was reapportioned (The Constitution of the Black Hand, 1911). Because this integration did not take place initially, the Black Hand and other organizations took drastic measures to try to make their dream of a "unified Serbdom" a reality.

On perhaps one of the most infamous days in history, group member Gavrilo Princip shot Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Bosnia, in a demonstration of the displeasure that he and other Serbs had for the Austro-Hungarian occupation of "Serbian" Bosnia. This event triggered the First World War for reasons of European alignment that are outside the scope of

this paper, but it also shows the great length to which nationalists at the time were willing to go when it came to making their claim on land in the region. The occasion thus demonstrates the important role that claims over land played at this point in history. In a world without an Ottoman occupying force, the designation of which religious and ethnic groups should have which land became a rallying point for many nationalistic organizations (Slack, 2001).

This struggle over land did not cease with the onset of the war or even its conclusion. Over the course of World War I, "both Serbian and Croatian nationalist movements emerged within Bosnia, each with aspirations for absorbing Bosnia into a Greater Croatia and a Greater Serbia, respectively" (Slack, 2001). By the war's end, these movements were largely unsuccessful and a new Kingdom of Yugoslavia that incorporated Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia was established. The success of this kingdom was short-lived, however, as World War II soon broke out and ethnic and religious tensions flared once again in the Balkans.

During World War II, two major nationalist groups competed for dominance in the region. One, the Ustase, was "an ultranationalist political group that blended elements of Fascism with Catholic Fundamentalism to empower the Croats against their perceived Serbian oppressors" (Ferraro, 2011). This group, as Ferraro explains, "never accepted the legitimacy of the centralized, Serb-dominated Yugoslav state and campaigned continually for greater autonomy." Their main goal was to produce a "racially pure" Croatian state, which entailed widespread persecution against Serbs, gypsies, and Jews. Interestingly, though, the Ustase movement promoted ethnic Muslims as a constituent people of Croatia alongside Catholics (Jelic-Butic, 1977). Fikreta Jelic-Butic attributes this decree to a desire to oust and defeat the Serbs at all costs. Had the Ustase not reconciled differences with the Muslims, it would have been very difficult to combat the Serbs who had tried to conquer their more developed region previously.

The Ustase used a comparable alliance with the Axis Powers—who shared similar ideologies of fascism and racial purism—during the course of the war to grow their power and exact their vengeance on the Serbs (Ferraro, 2011). When the Croatian state declared its independence from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1939, Ustase extremists reached out to the Axis Powers with an outline of their beliefs and expression of backing. In return, they were supplied with support that afforded them the ability to seize control of the new nation's government. Thus, the movement which had previously been fairly underground and employed a great deal of guerrilla fighting now had access to all the resources of full nationhood. With their new resources, the Ustase constructed concentration camps very similar to contemporary ones in Germany and Poland where they systematically killed ethnic Serbs en masse. The death toll of the largest of these camps—Jasenovac— is estimated to be between 45,000 and 52,000 Serbs, in addition to 27,000 to 40,000 Jews and people of Roma ancestry (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). Estimates for the total number of Serbs killed by the Ustase are still a matter of controversy, but range from at least 200,000 to as many as 500,000 (Yeomans, 2013). Several estimates place this figure at approximately 400,000 (Ferraro, 2011; Mirkovic, 1999). This war crime would later serve as a rallying point for Serbian nationalism and rising anti-Croat sentiment in the republic.

On the other side of the conflict were the Serbian Chetniks, a resistance movement fighting mostly against Nazi Germany and the Independent State of Croatia. With very similar goals and methodologies as their Croatian counterparts, the Chetniks sought to establish an enlarged "Greater Serbia" state and were notorious for terrorizing citizens (Ferraro, 2011). To counter the violence against Serbs by the Ustase, the Chetniks targeted and murdered Ustase or those sympathetic to their cause. In addition, they concentrated violence against Muslims from Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania, who they viewed as historical enemies from the aforementioned Ottoman conquest.

These two groups engaged in nearly constant fighting that spanned the entire region during the course of the war (Ferraro, 2011). The movements, however, eventually lost their traction among their respective native populations for the extent of the violence in which they engaged ("Yugoslavia," 2014). This was compounded by an increasingly dominant Ally performance in Europe and the advent of a new Communist Partisan movement which was Ally-

backed. The Ustase and Chetniks were therefore replaced by the more united Communist Partisans who routed them in battle after battle near the end of the war. The Partisans, led by engaging Communist Party leader Josip Broz Tito, took control of Yugoslavia when the fighting ceased and established a new multinational, multiethnic country with semi-autonomous republics (Djilas, 1995).

Tito and his advisors initially tried to establish a comprehensive Yugoslav identity among the populace by which all peoples in the nation could identify, regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation. They did this by redirecting focus from ethnic tensions to the shared success that the new country could have as a Communist powerhouse. Concentrating on the idea that nationalism was a capitalist construct and that religious divides limited the productivity of the workforce, the Communists tried to eradicate the notion of religious or ethnic divisions that had played so major a part in Yugoslavia's past (Djilas, 1995). Tito encouraged members of each republic to embrace Communism's stance on egalitarianism and to look upon their brothers in sister republics with favor. As the popular saying went, however, President Tito still seemed to be the only Yugoslav in the nation after numerous policies trying to change Yugoslavian culture were laid out. In this way, the Communist government was eventually forced to recognize the important role of religions in the nation and began to work more closely to keep the different religious groups appeased and not at odds with one another.

The Road to War

This policy of appeasement worked relatively well for nearly a half-century and no major outbreaks of violence plagued the tumultuous region. In the few years preceding the onset of the Civil War, however, things began to change for the worse and tensions grew more heated. Much of this change has been attributed to the rhetoric and political action of young Serb politician Slobodan Milosevic (Doder & Branson, 1995). At first just an elected member of the Communist Party in Serbia, Milosevic rose to prominence after becoming a vocal supporter of limited autonomy for Muslim Kosovans within the Serbian republic ("Yugoslavia," 2014). His fiery speeches and impassioned addresses drew many Serbs to him, and he was elected to the presidency of the republic in 1989.

As president, Milosevic continued to supply the Serbian people with heated dialogue like, "At home and abroad, Serbia's enemies are massing against us. We say to them 'We are not afraid.' 'We will not flinch from battle'" (Milosevic, 1989). He combined this rhetoric with tangible action by following through on his campaign promises and enacting reforms that constrained the Kosovan sub-republic. In March 1989, the crisis in Serbia deepened after the adoption of amendments to the Serbian constitution that allowed the Serbian republic's government to reassert effective power over Kosovo ("Yugoslavia," 2014). This action in turn sparked a hunger strike among miners in Kosovo in protest of the new limits placed on Kosovan freedoms. The strike soon gained support in both Slovenia and Croatia, as leaders in both countries called for Milosevic to redact his reforms and meet the desires of the Kosovans.

Milosevic refused, instead choosing to speak in Kosovo on the 600th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje. In his famous Gazimestan Speech, Milosevic addressed the nearly two million Serbs gathered while flanked by ornately-dressed Serbian priests. In his speech, he explained to the gathered masses the importance of Kosovo Polje and Vidovdan in Serbian history, making numerous references to the valor and honor with which the Serbs fought their Ottoman oppressors. Drawing on the memory of the battle that had been imbued in the minds of the Serbian people by the Orthodox Church, Milosevic discussed the perseverance of the Serbs and asserted that no one would ever be able to again conquer them. As Doder points out, "he identified with a holy cause and invoked a spirit of violence" that provided the beginnings of a nationalistic spirit which would divide the country (Doder & Branson, 1999). Perhaps the most telling sign of the conflict to come was the phrase that Milosevic said near the end of his speech: "After six centuries we are again waging struggle and confronting battles. These are not armed struggles, though that cannot yet be excluded" (Milosevic, 1989). Historians of Yugoslavia's dissolution identify this moment as one of the most pivotal when discussing the ensuing conflict ("Yugoslavia," 2014). For the first time since World War II, a Yugoslav politician on the national stage had suggested violence as a possible measure to assert dominance within the region and subdue a rival religious and ethnic group.

This statement and others went over poorly in other republics, namely Croatia, where new president Franjo Tudman was elected on a platform of "protect[ing] Croatia from Milosevic" (Perica, 2002) and his nationalized intentions. The statements also exacerbated the religious and ethnic divide in places like Croatia, where Serbs who lived in the south of Croatia demanded to join their land with that of Milosevic and the rest of Serbia, despite having peacefully lived with their Croatian neighbors for decades. Milosevic capitalized on this desire by insisting that such unification was necessary. Again relying on historical developments to excite emotionally-charged actions, he quipped that if the unification did not take place, then the Serbs in Croatia would be treated as they were by the Ustase government of World War II. Eventually, the extent of this warmongering and nationalistic rhetoric on the part of Milosevic forced the hand of Croatia and Slovenia, who both called referendums on independence and subsequently declared their cessation from Yugoslavia.

Conclusion

From the research presented, it can be concluded that religion and religious differences in the Yugoslav War were more the tools of political actors like Milosevic to nationalize their people than they were differences which would have inherently led to conflict on their own. While it is true that the region has an extensive historical record of conflict, politicians had to pull on violent acts from decades if not centuries prior to incite the kind of hatred and tension needed to begin a civil war. At the same time, it is important to understand these historical occurrences, as they played a major role in defining how the congruent religious and ethnic identities of Yugoslavia were first formed and how historical animosity between these groups was created. A long record of bloody and brutal interaction between the peoples of the different areas—and the constant reminders of the misdeeds of other religious groups provided by religious institutions like the Orthodox Church to their adherents—served as the powder that made the Balkans a keg ready to explode. When fiery speeches and impassioned commentary on historical conflict and perceived differences ignited the powder, one of the most deadly and harrowing civil wars of recent memory began.

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