

One Story – Several Interpretations

Post-Yugoslav Historiography on Yugoslavia*

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Abstract. The Yugoslav state was founded on 1 December 1918, when Serbia and Montenegro united with the South Slavic provinces of the disintegrated Austria–Hungary. This state emerged from the unification of South Slavs, each being at a different stage of identity formation. Yugoslavia was destroyed in 1941 during World War II, but it was later re-established as a federal republic, with a strong internal cohesion built on the ideals of “brotherhood and unity.” However, in 1991, the Yugoslav state collapsed once again. The experience of living in a common state was different for each of the nations involved, and today’s national historiographies present different perspectives on the Yugoslav era. This study aims to explore the main historical narratives of each nation, emphasising diverging interpretations. Among these national historiographies, the Serbian one tends to adopt a more positive view of the former state, while Slovenian historians regard the years spent in Yugoslavia as a developmental phase that also yielded certain achievements. Croatian historiography, on the other hand, perceives the Yugoslav period primarily as a time of resistance against Serbian dominance and centralism in the context of national development.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, historiography, national perspective, centralism, federalism, coexistence

At the end of World War I, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was established as part of sweeping geopolitical changes. This newly formed Yugoslav state brought together nations that had never before coexisted within a single country. Two decades later, during World War II, the royal Yugoslavia disintegrated, only to be reconstituted in the final phase of the war with a new leadership and a restructured state apparatus. Throughout the existence of Yugoslavia, the relationships among its constituent nations and peoples—and their interpretations of coexistence within the

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South Slavic state—was a largely taboo subject in both historiography and public discourse. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, each nation produced its own narrative of the shared statehood, resulting in comprehensive monographs and thematic compilations, particularly in connection with the centenary of Yugoslavia's founding.¹ In all the cases, the interpretation of the past is shaped by national perspectives. The central questions include: How did a given nation or territory come to be part of the South Slavic state? What were the historical periods and circumstances that facilitated or hindered the economic and cultural development of the nations and regions? What are the events that specific ethnic groups regard as grievous or tragic?

Formation of the Yugoslav state: royal Yugoslavia

Due to shifts in security policy and other contributing factors, the previous European order—based on the balance of great empires—was replaced by a new system of alliances and security arrangements. At the time of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, each South Slavic nation was compelled to redefine its concepts of state organisation and reconcile them with the realities of the international political landscape. On 1 December 1918, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was established. Officially, the new state was formed by Serbia (which had already unified with Montenegro and the region of Vojvodina) and the short-lived, unrecognised State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, proclaimed in Zagreb on 29 October 1918, encompassing the South Slavic territories of the Monarchy. The question of the internal structure of the state arose during the preparatory negotiations and remained a central issue throughout subsequent historical turning points. The institutional framework of the first Yugoslavia was constructed along centralist and unitarist lines; the constitutions of 1921 and 1931 did not recognise any form of territorial or national autonomy. Nevertheless, the formation of a unified Yugoslav nation and the integration of the country did not progress as the political leadership had expected. In response to persistent regional nationalisms, King Alexander introduced a royal dictatorship in 1929. The tensions among the constituent nations were not alleviated by the imposed ideology of Yugoslavism. Consequently, Prince

1 On the occasion of the centenary, two contrasting compilations were published in Belgrade. *Istorija jedne utopije*, edited by Petrović et al., offers a sympathetic account of Serbia's role in Yugoslavia and foregrounds Serbian grievances. In contrast, *Jugoslavija u istorijskoj perspektivi*, edited by Perović et al., adopts a broader historical lens, examining the lived experiences of various national groups and addressing socio-economic dimensions of the Yugoslav state. For comprehensive overviews, see: Dimić, *Srbija u Jugoslaviji*; Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja*; Fischer et al., eds, *Slovenska novejša zgodovina*; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2008*; Štih, Simoniti, and Vodopivec, *Slovenska zgodovina*.

Regent Paul attempted a political compromise with the Croats, and the creation of the short-lived Banovina of Croatia in 1939 may have represented a potential step toward overcoming the centralist structure. The trajectory of these developments remains speculative, as the invasion by German and neighbouring state forces in early April 1941 brought an end to the existence of the first Yugoslavia.²

Serbian historiography emphasises that Serbia was the driving force behind the unification process. In the final phase of the war, when the Allies no longer insisted on the preservation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the international circumstances increasingly favoured Serbia. The unification was not a product of chance. From the nineteenth century, Serbian political movements of various ideological orientations regarded the “gathering” of Serbs living in different states as a central mission. Moreover, the political appeal of the Yugoslav idea—based on the linguistic and cultural kinship between Serbs and Croats—grew steadily stronger. This vision entailed the creation of a large South Slavic state stretching from Maribor to Split, and from Subotica to Ohrid. For Serbs, the Yugoslav concept consistently served as a tool of resistance against the expansionist ambitions of the great empires.

“Pašić asserted, unification with the Croats was necessary, because in the future, under the pressure of great powers, only large states would be able to survive.”³

According to Miloš Ković, the Serbs actively pursued the creation of a Yugoslav state, even assuming the responsibility of protecting Croatia and Slovenia from Italian territorial ambitions. This position was already evident when the Entente powers, in the Treaty of London (1915), promised South Slavic territories to Italy. In later public discourse and political commentary, the idea of establishing a “Greater Serbian state” frequently emerged as an alternative vision. However, this concept was explicitly rejected by both Prince Regent Alexander and Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić.⁴

Serbian historians often situate the creation of the Yugoslav state within the broader process of Europe’s democratic and liberal transformation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This trajectory includes the unification of Germany and Italy, followed by the collapse of empires and the emergence or re-establishment of nation-states such as Poland and Czechoslovakia—developments interpreted

2 The literature on Yugoslavia is virtually inexhaustible. For comprehensive overviews, see Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavia*. For the royal Yugoslav period, see Bíró, *A jugoszláv állam*.

3 Ković, “Srbi i jugoslovenska ideja,” 603. Ković argues that Croatian Yugoslavism, particularly in its early formulations, served as a vehicle for diminishing Serbian political influence and facilitating Habsburg penetration into the southern Slavic territories.

4 Ković, “Srbi i jugoslovenska ideja,” 609.

as “the triumph of the national idea over imperial ideology.”⁵ In this context, the Yugoslav state held considerable geopolitical significance within the new European order shaped under the leadership of France and Great Britain.

“At first, Yugoslavia represented a barrier to Germanic domination in the south-east of Europe. Then, it was part of a sanitary cordon towards Soviet Russia, which had tried, throughout the previous century, to get through to the Mediterranean. The mixed religious and national composition of the Yugoslav state also eliminated the fear of British experts on the Balkans (Robert Seaton-Watson) that, after the disappearance of Austria–Hungary, the creation of a big, united Serbian state, would represent a latent danger of Russia dominating the region in the future, due to its historical ties and kindred Orthodox and Slavonic characteristics.”⁶

Serbian historians depict the process of unification as follows.⁷ In 1914, the Serbian parliament adopted a declaration in Niš, identifying the liberation and unification of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes as a central war aim. More intensive negotiations regarding the establishment of a new state began in the final years of the war, involving Croats and Slovenes with Yugoslav sympathies. For most of these actors, the prospect of a shared state was not inherently appealing; rather, their position was shaped by fears of German and Italian expansionism, as well as concerns over social unrest and potential anarchy. The formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was carried out with the consent of legitimate representative bodies, including the Montenegrin parliament, the Vojvodina assembly, and the National Council in Zagreb. Serbia—having made the greatest sacrifices for the common state—carried the legacy of statehood and, at the end of the war, was counted among the victors. This status provided Serbia with advantageous conditions during the peace negotiations.

A particularly emphatic point in Serbian historiography is that post-World War I Yugoslavia was the first state to encompass the vast majority of the Serbian population. Leading Serbian politicians perceived the new state as an enlarged Serbia and sought to establish Yugoslav unity under their leadership. This effort was facilitated by the fact that, despite being a numerical minority across the country, Serbs held influential positions within the party structure, even in Croatia. Serbian historians regard positively any attempt aimed at overcoming “provincial nationalisms,” viewing such efforts as intended to preserve the integrity of the state. At the same time, they acknowledge that the official ideology failed to penetrate the broader layers of society, which continued to adhere to their pre-existing national identities.⁸ State

5 Terzić, *Etnički sastav stanovništva*, 11.

6 Bataković, “The Balkan Piedmont,” 62.

7 Bataković, “The Balkan Piedmont,” 55–64.

8 In this context, religious divisions are often cited as a contributing factor, with some Serbian

policies designed to promote development are praised in contemporary Serbian historiography, though it tends not to emphasise which regions benefited most from these measures. Objectively, it is also recognised that throughout Yugoslavia's existence, neither the society nor the economy was successfully integrated.

Serbian historiography acknowledges that the contemporary Serbian elite either failed to understand or consciously rejected the federalist vision advocated by the Croats. It does not condemn this stance; rather, it accepts that the Serbian elite, invoking the concept of national unity, dismissed the Croats' appeals to historical rights. The only significant criticism is directed at the Serbian political leadership's lack of preparedness in 1939, when "centralism was replaced by a federation." At that critical juncture, there was no unified Serbian position or cohesive political-cultural organisation to defend national interests. Unlike the Croats, who were consolidated under the Croatian Peasant Party, the Serbs did not establish a large administrative unit to represent their collective interests. The Serbian–Croatian agreement (Cvetković–Maček Pact) and the creation of the autonomous Banovina of Croatia did not resolve the Serbian or Slovenian questions. Outside the ruling party, the Serbian population met the agreement with widespread rejection.⁹

In discussions surrounding the Serbian–Croatian agreement, a recurring question concerns how Serbs and Croats perceived the shared state. For Serbs from the Kingdom of Serbia, Yugoslavia represented the expansion of Serbian statehood, parliamentarism, and democracy. For Serbs from the former Austro–Hungarian territories and Montenegro, it embodied the realisation of national unity. By contrast, Croats and Slovenes continued to pursue the affirmation of their national identities and statehood even during the royal Yugoslav period. Croatian separatism persisted—only "Belgrade replaced Vienna."¹⁰ Due to his consistent opposition to the agreement, Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović has received increasingly positive historical evaluations. His tenure is interpreted as an effort to preserve Yugoslav unity and to counter both Croatian political currents—Maček's moderate autonomism and the radicalism of the Ustaša movement. The international context was also unfavourable to Stojadinović. Following the Munich Agreement, the threat of violent border changes in Europe became tangible, and British foreign policy encouraged Prince Regent Paul to make concessions to the Croats.¹¹

historians explicitly blaming the Catholic Church for deepening interethnic tensions. See Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja*, 384.

9 Serbian works on Royal Yugoslavia: Dimić, *Srbi i Jugoslavija*; Dimić, *Srbija u Jugoslaviji*, 35–213; Petranović, *The Yugoslav Experience*.

10 Svirčević, "Milan Stojadinović i hrvatsko pitanje," 85.

11 Svirčević, "Milan Stojadinović i hrvatsko pitanje," 85–97. For Stojadinović's latest assessment, see also Đurković, ed., *Milan Stojadinović*.

Most Serbian historians attribute the failure of state integration primarily to Croatian political behaviour. Croats are often portrayed as perpetually dissatisfied without cause, as separatists, obstructers of state cohesion, and opponents of necessary development initiatives.¹²

Numerous studies reflect the view that “both the Yugoslavia of King Alexander and that of the AVNOJ (Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia) could have been replaced by a decidedly better alternative: namely, the creation of a unified state of Serbian lands.”¹³ More recently, several historians have adopted the position—cited by Milorad Ekmečić in his book, without indicating whether he personally agrees—that the creation of Yugoslavia was a strategic error for the Serbian nation. In their view, Serbia forfeited its internationally recognised statehood by merging into a Yugoslav framework. “Serbia drowned in the improvisation of Yugoslav statehood, with which it suffered the greatest defeat in its history.” The idea of Serbian national sovereignty and statehood was significantly weakened. For Serbs, the creation of Yugoslavia amounted to a Pyrrhic victory: following a war marked by immense sacrifice, the Serbian national movement was forced into a defensive posture.¹⁴

Contemporary Croatian historians evaluate the history of Yugoslavia almost exclusively from the perspective of Croatian statehood. They acknowledge that genuine efforts were made to create a joint Serbian–Croatian–Slovene state, based on the belief that liberation from the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy would provide the foundations for the free economic and cultural development of the Croatian nation. Today, however, some historians view the activities of the Yugoslav Committee as a mistake—firstly, because it tied the Croatian cause to the Serbian question, and secondly, because in the Corfu Declaration it effectively renounced Croatian statehood. The State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, proclaimed in Zagreb on 29 October 1918, comprised territories formerly belonging to the Monarchy, including Slovenia, Croatia, Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vojvodina. In principle, it could have chosen between independence and unification with another state. In practice, however, there was no real alternative: Serbian and Italian troops had entered

12 In this regard, we refer to Ekmečić’s periodisation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia: the years 1918–1921 were marked by anticipation of a new constitution, expected to establish a parliamentary monarchy on democratic foundations; 1921–1929 witnessed a period of Catholic resistance to the unitary state, culminating in a tragic confrontation in the Yugoslav parliament, after which royal dictatorship was introduced to stabilise the country; 1929–1939 saw a phase of mutual rapprochement, including the establishment of Croatian political autonomy; and finally, between 1939 and 1941, demands emerged for a federal arrangement and, among some Catholic actors, for secession from the common state. Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja*, 390.

13 Marković, “Smisao stvaranja Jugoslavije,” 60.

14 Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja*, 371.

its territory—the Italians occupying large stretches along the Adriatic coast, while Serbian forces were in several places, such as Split, greeted as liberators. Ultimately, the National Council decided in favour of creating a joint state with Serbia. Serbia, however, offered no guarantees regarding the structure of the new state.

“Serbia had two fundamental interests: to strengthen itself as a state, to increase its territory, and to unite all Serbs in one state.”¹⁵

In the South Slavic state, which stretched from the Alps to nearly as far as the Aegean Sea, the Croats found themselves in entirely new circumstances—most notably, separated from the Central European sphere that had long been significant for Croatia. In the conflict between centralist and federalist visions, the latter was defeated, and as a result of the centralist structure of royal Yugoslavia, the Croats quickly became disillusioned with the new state. Within Yugoslavia, a “Greater Serbian” program was realised: neither the Croatian nation nor its distinct historical rights was recognised. The political system allowed key state decisions to be made without Croatian participation, while the dominant Serbian political forces sought a disproportionate share of the most influential positions in government. Croatian territories were fragmented and administratively separated from each other, and with the support of state power, the Serbs exploited the non-Serb regions of the country. Throughout the royal period, Croatian lands paid higher taxes than Serbia proper, while receiving only a small fraction of state investment. Croatian political representation fell below the level of the previous era—for example, the provincial government ceased to function. Arising from accumulated grievances and unmet aspirations, the entire Croatian nation soon rallied behind the Croatian Peasant Party, which waged an unyielding and consistent struggle for some form of Croatian statehood.

The constitutional structure generated political and social tensions, ultimately threatening the stability of the state. From 1935, in the spirit of a certain political consolidation and in light of changing international circumstances, the Croatian question could once again be placed on the agenda. The 1939 agreement creating the autonomous Banovina of Croatia (the Cvetković–Maček Pact) might have marked the beginning of a resolution to the Croatian issue. It remains uncertain, however, whether the Serbian political elite would have accepted this change, given its view that Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković had capitulated to the Croats. As Croatian historians emphasise, the Banovina was not an independent state but remained one of the constituent units of the Yugoslav monarchy. From the perspective of Croatian statehood, the arrangement was only a partial solution—yet it entailed no sacrifices and, under the prevailing conditions, nothing more could have been achieved.

15 Radelić, “Hrvatska i Jugoslavija,” 758.

The shortcomings of the agreement, however, opened the way for the two extremist movements—the Communists and the Ustaše—whose activities ultimately set Croatia on a tragic course.¹⁶

World War I, the demise of the Habsburg Monarchy, and the formation of the Yugoslav Kingdom in 1918 were radical turning points in Slovene history. Before that year, the Slovene political elite had always envisaged the existence of the Slovene nation within the framework of a larger state. For a long time, Slovenes hoped that a trialist reform of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy would grant them an autonomous province. On 17 May 1917, acting on behalf of the South Slavic Club, in the Imperial Council Anton Korošec read the relevant proposal in German. When no favourable response was forthcoming, the possibility of a Yugoslav solution gradually entered Slovene political thinking. Slovenia joined the South Slavic unitary state not directly, but through the short-lived—never internationally recognised—State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. The significance of this development lies particularly in the following fact:

“The formation of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs on 29 October 1918 was a turning point in Slovene history. The new state only actually existed for just over a month, far too brief an existence to organise in detail its internal relations and powers, but politically and administratively it was a »confederal republic«, in which Slovenes governed themselves for the first time.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, it was not easy to reconcile Slovene society to the idea of a South Slavic state; in the end, the appearance of Italian troops proved decisive. In the face of rapidly unfolding events, by late November—all three major Slovene parties, even if differing in their views on the state’s internal organisation —supported unification with Serbia.

“The »proclamation of unification« on 1 December 1918 was not met with the same level of celebration as had greeted news of the end of Austria-Hungary, but there were no vocal protests. The general conviction was that the unresolved border issues with Austria and Italy meant there was no real choice.”¹⁸

16 Croatian works on Royal Yugoslavia: Matković, *Povijest Jugoslavije*, 58–230; Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest*, 60–119; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918.–2008*, 15–404; Goldstein, “Hrvatska i Hrvati u Jugoslaviji,” 115–29; Šokčević, *Hrvatska od stoljeća 7. do danas*, 372–406.

17 Štih, Simoniti, and Vodopivec, *A Slovene History*, 349. Since the 1990s, research into the history of the Slovenian-Croatian-Serbian state has also gained importance. See Perovšek, “Položaj Slovencev v Državi Slovencev, Hrvatov in Srbov.”

18 Štih, Simoniti, and Vodopivec, *A Slovene History*, 352.

Slovene historiography emphasises that the separation from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was the correct course of action, as was the fact that—given the circumstances—the Slovenes ultimately joined the South Slavic state voluntarily. However, the politicians of the time could not know what kind of Yugoslavia they were entering; an idealised vision of the new South Slavic state stood before their eyes. In many respects, this vision proved illusory—first, when the powers of the provincial government in Ljubljana were significantly reduced, and later, when it was abolished altogether.¹⁹

In the Royal Yugoslavia, Slovenes found themselves in an unfamiliar cultural environment and had to adapt to a new political system in which, to advance their interests, they were compelled to align with the court and the centralist Serbian ruling parties. The catholic Slovenian People's Party effectively governed the Slovene territories autonomously, owing to the successful lobbying of its prominent representatives at court. When parliamentary circumstances allowed—or when it was deemed necessary from the court's perspective—the leading Slovene party entered the government. Their leader, Anton Korošec, served twelve times as minister, twice as deputy prime minister, and once—as the only non-Serb—to hold the office of prime minister in the royal government. This political practice lost its influence in the era following the Serbian-Croatian agreement.²⁰

From the standpoint of national development, it was a considerable achievement that, within Yugoslavia, the majority of Slovenes were at last united in a single state. Slovene became the official language, and the Slovenes freed themselves from Italian and German influence; as a result, Slovene cultural institutions underwent vigorous growth. This expansion occurred despite the limited budgetary allocations for education and culture within the relatively impoverished Yugoslav state. Notwithstanding their dissatisfaction with the authoritarian and centralist political system, Slovenes experienced an unprecedented phase of dynamic cultural development—one oriented towards and open to Europe. In the sphere of culture, one of the most significant milestones was the establishment of the University of Ljubljana, a national-language institution representing the highest level of education. Likewise, the artistic scene was renewed, while Slovene-language journalism and publishing advanced by leaps and bounds.²¹

19 This opinion was expressed by participants at a conference of historians in 1994. See the presentations in *Časopis za zgodovino in narodnopolisje* 1994/1. For example: Melik, "Jugoslavija – zgodovinska zmota ali nuja?"

20 Fischer et al., eds, *Slovenska novejša zgodovina*, 186–506; Štih, Simoniti, and Vodopivec, *Slovenska zgodovina*, 338–96; Perovšek, "Slovenians and Yugoslavia 1918–1941," 47–66; Repe, "Slovenija i Slovenci u Jugoslaviji," 172–87.

21 Dolenc, *Kulturni boj: slovenska kulturna politika*.

The Slovene regions which, before 1918, had formed part of the poorly developed southern periphery of the Habsburg Monarchy, emerged within the Yugoslav state as the most developed and most industrialised areas of the country.²² In recent decades, however, there has been a marked increase in scholarly interest in a wider range of subjects, reflecting the diversification and expansion of thematic approaches within historical and cultural studies.²³

The second Yugoslavia: federal reconstruction

Following the disintegration of the first Yugoslav state, the idea of Yugoslav statehood did not vanish into historical oblivion. On the contrary, from 1943–1944 onwards, the Allied anti-fascist coalition explicitly endorsed the restoration of Yugoslavia. This vision was embraced and redefined by the communist-led partisan movement, which placed the preservation and renewal of the Yugoslav state at the centre of its political program—now with a markedly different approach to the national question. At its second session in 1943, the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) resolved to establish a federation composed of six equal republics, grounded in the principle of national self-determination. This federal reorganisation was formalised in 1944, when the local liberation committees—functioning as proto-parliaments—were integrated into the Yugoslav federal framework. Over time, these six republics acquired increasingly autonomous competencies, and in practice, each began to operate with many of the attributes of a nation-state.

The federal restructuring of Yugoslavia elicited markedly different responses from its constituent nations. Serbia, favouring a centralised and unified state model, viewed this structure as more conducive to its national development. Consequently, Serbian political elites often sought to temper initiatives aimed at expanding the rights and autonomy of individual republics. In contrast, Croatian and Slovenian actors perceived federalism and autonomy as safeguards against the potential hegemony of

22 Lazarević, *Slovensko gospodarstvo v prvi Jugoslaviji*.

23 “The picture of the interwar period painted in Slovene historiography today is much more complex and less nationally biased than thirty or forty years ago. New, politically and ideologically balanced research was done on the Slovene opposition against the Serbian and Yugoslav centralist and authoritarian political pressures. [...] Economic and social historians published innovative studies on the economic modernisation, industrial development, banking system and social conditions in the Slovene part of the Yugoslav kingdom. Cultural historians studied the political orientations and ideological divisions of the intelligentsia more extensively than before. And at the same time, political historians continued and still continue to argue that the unsolved national issues and what was until 1939 a rigid centralist system were the main reasons for the quick Yugoslav defeat and disintegration in 1941.” Vodopivec, “Slovene Historiography,” 103.

other national groups—particularly Serbian dominance. In the late 1960s, calls for reform intensified across the federation. Advocates pushed for more rational economic policies and sought to soften ideological rigidity through liberalising measures. Simultaneously, national demands were becoming increasingly vocal, reflecting a growing discontent with the status quo. In the early 1970s, the federal leadership moved to suppress republican governments deemed too liberal. Yet paradoxically, in 1974, the regime adopted a new federal constitution that significantly expanded the powers of the republics, further institutionalising their autonomy.

As Yugoslavia entered a prolonged economic crisis in the late 1980s, the leadership of the north-western republics—particularly Slovenia and Croatia—began to view the federal framework as an impediment to their progress. Newly emerging political parties, often organised along national lines, echoed these sentiments, leading to escalating tensions between republics and national communities. By this point, the prospect of a modernised, reformed federation had lost all credibility. In 1991, following declarations of independence by Croatia and Slovenia, the Yugoslav state disintegrated.²⁴

Serbian historiography often emphasises that the post-1945 Yugoslav state was reconstituted in the spirit of “partisan Yugoslavism.” According to this perspective, the Communist Party—even during the interwar period—pursued a vision of national balance that entailed the creation of nation-states at the expense of Serbian territorial integrity, followed by their integration into a federal framework. The party adopted the theory of “Greater Serbian hegemony” as a negative construct and systematically targeted the Serbian bourgeoisie as a reactionary force. The Soviet Union also viewed the royal Yugoslav state and the contemporary Serbian elite with hostility, reinforcing the delegitimisation of pre-war Serbian political and intellectual structures. During World War II and in its immediate aftermath, the Serbian bourgeoisie was effectively dismantled, the Serbian national movement suppressed, and the Serbian intelligentsia subjected to persecution.²⁵

The federal reorganisation of Yugoslavia after 1945 resulted in each constituent republic being structured as a centralised nation-state—except for Serbia, which was uniquely federalised through the creation of two autonomous provinces. Serbian public opinion has perceived this arrangement as unjust, particularly in light of the fact that other republics were delineated largely along national territorial lines. For example, the unification of Croatia and Dalmatia into a single republic facilitated Croatian national consolidation, whereas Serbs were dispersed across multiple republics. Similarly detrimental to the development of the Serbian nation was the

24 Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias*.

25 Dimić, *Srbi i Jugoslavija*, 63–185.

effort by Tito's communists to construct distinct Montenegrin, Macedonian, and Bosniak national identities during the delineation of federal units. Driven by Titoist ideology, these efforts are viewed as having fragmented Serbian ethnic cohesion and undermined its political representation.²⁶

Between 1945 and 1991, the Yugoslav state evolved primarily according to the Slovenian and Croatian federal visions. Rather than ensuring equality among nations, the system prioritised parity among federal units. Tito's governance was underpinned by the belief that a coalition of "national-communist oligarchies" could neutralise the perceived threat of "Greater Serbian" hegemony. This strategic orientation was encapsulated in the slogan: "Weak Serbia, Strong Yugoslavia."²⁷

Serbian historiography complains that the borders between the Yugoslav republics were (for the most part) not drawn along geographical, historical, or ethnic lines, and that they were not established through democratic agreement, but were determined at the end of the war by a few leaders of the Yugoslav Communist Party based on the Yugoslav communists' position on the national question. Serbian critics argue that this process systematically disadvantaged Serbs, as substantial Serbian populations in Croatia, Macedonia, and Vojvodina found themselves outside the confines of the Serbian republic. Within the communist ideological paradigm one can discern the inheritance of Austro-Hungarian imperial thought, the instrumentalisation of the struggle against "Greater Serbianism" as a means to maintain equilibrium among Balkan nationalisms, and the Comintern's internationalist theory and praxis, which portrayed interwar Yugoslavia as a Versailles-era "construct" and, after 1935, actively sought its dissolution.²⁸

The post-war Yugoslav state was initially organised as a centralised party-state, and although it later underwent decentralisation, it remained under the firm control of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia throughout its existence. The Party positioned itself as a staunch opponent of all forms of nationalism, chauvinism, and religious exclusivism, yet simultaneously suppressed intellectual pluralism and independent thought. Following Yugoslavia's break with the Cominform in 1948, the regime gradually abandoned its monolithic social and political practices in favour of a self-managing federal model. This transformation marked a significant ideological shift: from that point onwards, no official Yugoslav ideology was promulgated. Nevertheless, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was a deliberate effort to cultivate a shared Yugoslav consciousness.²⁹

26 Ković, "Srbi i jugoslovenska ideja," 611.

27 Terzić, *Etnički sastav stanovništva*, 14–15.

28 Terzić, *Etnički sastav stanovništva*, 13; Čavoški, "Druga Jugoslavija," 141.

29 Dimić, *Srbi i Jugoslavija*, 63–185.

From the 1960s onwards, the Yugoslav party leadership grew increasingly divided over the future of the federation. Republican elites began to prioritise their own regional interests, gradually distancing themselves from the idea of a unified national agenda. The social transformations that emerged in the mid-decade contributed to the strengthening of republican sovereignty and the weakening of the federal state apparatus. Internal power struggles within the League of Communists culminated in the dismissal of Aleksandar Ranković in 1966—a powerful and influential Serbian politician who also oversaw the state security services. Serbs widely perceived his removal as a targeted, anti-Serbian measure. Similarly, the silencing of voices such as Dobrica Ćosić, who called for action against the rising Albanian nationalism in Kosovo and the displacement of Serbs from the region, was also interpreted by many as part of a broader pattern of anti-Serbian policies.³⁰

Serbia voiced strong opposition to the 1974 Constitution, which elevated its two autonomous provinces—Kosovo and Vojvodina—to constituent elements of the federation, granting them rights equal to those of the republics. This restructuring, coupled with the republics' growing self-identification as nation-states, effectively obstructed the possibility of Serbian national integration within a unified state framework. During Tito's lifetime, Serbian political actors refrained from assertive action. It was only in the latter half of the 1980s that national concerns and demands were articulated more sharply—most notably in the *Memorandum* of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts—and organised political mobilisation intensified, culminating in the so-called “anti-bureaucratic revolution” that facilitated Slobodan Milošević's rise to power. Serbian historiography identifies a series of grievances stemming from this period: the marginalisation of Serbia's economic interests, the fragmentation of its territorial integrity, the perceived overemphasis on minority rights, the expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo, and the rise of Albanian irredentism. These developments, it is argued, prevented the formation of a coherent economic, cultural, and administrative unity across Serbian-populated areas.³¹

Due to these accumulated grievances, the “Serbian question” resurfaced, bringing to the fore the perceived necessity of restructuring the Yugoslav state.³² As a result

30 Bogetić, “Nacionalno pitanje i Jugoslavija,” 63.

31 Dimić, *Srbi i Jugoslavija*, 98–185; Perović, “Srbi i Srbija u novovekovnoj istoriji,” 238–48; Čavoški, “Druga Jugoslavija,” 133–45.

32 It should be noted, however, that some authors emphasise that, over time, the Serbs abandoned their role as guardians of Yugoslavia and ceased to identify Yugoslavia with Serbia. Within the Serbian political leadership, there was also a growing willingness to restructure the federation. Marko Nikezić's program marked a profound ideological break from the dominant Serbian elite of the twentieth century. Bešlin, “Reforma jugoslovenske federacije.” For more on Serbian modernisation and this ultimately unsuccessful policy, see Bešlin, *Ideja moderne Srbije*.

of the reconfiguration—or rather the “federalisation”—of the federation, marked by the introduction of confederal elements through constitutional amendments between 1967 and 1971, the values of Serbian nationalism were re-consolidated. By the late 1960s, the protagonists of the so-called Serbian question had started to emerge publicly. Leading figures of the Serbian critical intelligentsia—such as Dobrica Ćosić, Mihajlo Đurić, Mihajlo Marković, and Pavle Ivić—abandoned the Yugoslav unitarist perspective and increasingly advocated for Serbian national and territorial integration as the only viable alternative to the delegitimised and exhausted centralist model. After 1987, the leadership of the League of Communists of Serbia also embraced the national idea.³³

In identifying the causes of Yugoslavia’s dissolution, Serbian historiography primarily emphasises the selfishness of individual nations and republics, as well as the economic measures that weakened the shared economy. It also considers the international circumstances that played a key role in the collapse of both Yugoslav states. Germany, in particular, was a decisive factor.³⁴ Following German reunification and the Soviet Union’s defeat in the Cold War (which ultimately led to its own disintegration into constituent republics), Yugoslavia lost its strategic position in international relations. British and French interest in Yugoslavia waned, and France—aligned with Germany in pursuit of the “European project”—chose to support the newly independent states. The Versailles system was definitively dismantled, and Yugoslavia, alongside Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, was one of its final casualties.³⁵

In the newly constituted federal order, Croatia assumed its place as one of the six constituent republics. The borders between these republics were drawn with careful regard to ethnic composition and historical precedent, the republics themselves being organised to reflect the dominant nationalities—save for Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a sense of long-standing historical unity was deemed paramount. In this reconfiguration, Croatia surrendered the Bosnian-Herzegovinian

33 Bešlin, “Reforma jugoslovenske federacije.”

34 According to Ković, “The Yugoslav state collapsed due to changes in the balance of power among the great powers. It was dismantled by external factors, not because of the internal weaknesses of the Yugoslav idea.” Ković, *Srbi i jugoslovenska ideja*, 612. Ekmečić similarly argues that each dissolution of Yugoslavia was driven by external forces: in 1941 by fascism, in 1992 by “the American form of democracy,” and in 1945 by the communists who abolished the monarchy. Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između klanja i oranja*, 372. The motif of external forces conspiring against Serbia is a longstanding theme in Serbian historiography. It can be traced back to the hagiography of Saint Sava about Stefan Nemanja, which already portrayed the Serbs as God’s chosen people and Serbia as the “New Israel.” This ideology has continued to influence modern Serbian identity. Gál, *Egy ismeretlen ismerős*, 166–67.

35 Ković, “Srbi i jugoslovenska ideja”, 611.

territories it had held during the period of the Independent State of Croatia, along with the region of Srem; in exchange, it acquired Istria, the city and port of Rijeka, several islands in the Adriatic, and the Baranja district.

In the postwar reconfiguration of Yugoslavia, the federalist renewal ultimately prevailed over the most extreme separatist and unitarist ambitions. Initially, federalism served chiefly to demonstrate that the nationality question had been resolved; moreover, in accordance with Marxist–Leninist doctrine, the significance of the nation was expected to diminish and, in time, to wither away altogether. From 1945 until the mid-1960s, however, the country functioned in practice as a centralist state, in which “the centrally structured Communist Party dictated, led by a single man or a small coterie, which decided every essential matter.”³⁶ As Zdenko Radelić observed,

“Yugoslavia was a federation according to the Constitution, but in practice it was a unitary autocratic centralist state organised according to the Stalinist model. The right to self-determination, including the right to secession and sovereignty, were turned into mere phrases. The party principles of democratic centralism of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) negated the state principles of federalism, so the proclaimed federal order remained ineffective, and the republics were reduced to the executive organs of the central government, namely the communist leadership headed by Josip Broz Tito, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.”³⁷

By the close of the 1950s, economic growth had slowed markedly in Yugoslavia following the suspension of Western aid. At the instigation of the Croatian and Slovenian leaderships, a programme of economic reforms was launched in the mid-1960s, accompanied by a measure of political liberalisation—symbolised most visibly by the fall of Aleksandar Ranković. At the same time, movements emerged in nearly every part of the federation seeking to strengthen the autonomy of the individual nations and republics. Among these, the Croatian movement proved the most consequential, spanning developments from the 1967 Declaration on the Croatian Language to the suppression of the “Croatian Spring” in 1971. Broad in its social reach, the movement saw the republic’s party leadership dominated by reformists who pressed for a transformation of federal economic policy: a greater role for market mechanisms and the retention, to a larger extent, of foreign exchange revenues in the regions where they were generated—most notably, the channelling of tourism profits into Croatia’s own development. While the republican reformers demanded greater autonomy within the framework of Yugoslavia, the intellectuals and students

36 Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2008*, 417.

37 Radelić, “Hrvatska i Jugoslavija,” 760.

grouped around the Matica hrvatska, though refraining from explicit statements to that effect, had advanced to contemplating the idea of an independent Croatian state. The Matica, moreover, established an extensive network across the countryside.³⁸

At the party plenum convened in Karadorđevo on 1–2 December 1971, the leadership acted decisively to halt the ongoing political currents. The movement advocating democratisation and national objectives was suppressed, and leaders who had tolerated or supported it were removed from office across the federation—including in Serbia. Yet, this did not bring the process of further federalisation to a standstill. Subsequent constitutional amendments, followed by the 1974 Constitution, under the stewardship of the old conservative wing, conferred broader powers upon the republics. The principles of parity, consensus, and veto by republican representatives, together with collective leadership and rotation at all levels, were instituted, and Yugoslavia moved ever closer to the character of a confederal state. Only a single centralised institution endured: the Yugoslav People's Army, while the considerable authority of Tito himself still served at that time as a stabilising counterweight.³⁹

Tito's political career is often characterised by his skill in navigating between rival factions within the Communist Party, thereby retaining power over an extended period and exerting a decisive influence on both domestic and foreign policy. The foundation of his approach lay in balancing the competing interests of the Yugoslav nations during the implementation of the federal system. He resisted the hegemonistic ambitions of the Serbian leadership in Serbia, while simultaneously thwarting Croatian aspirations for a confederal arrangement or outright independence. Through a combination of coercion and deft political manoeuvring, he succeeded in preventing national tensions from erupting into open conflict. As one assessment noted,

“This policy, instead of resolving interethnic relations on a democratic basis, resulted only in sweeping the contradictions under the carpet. In Tito's Yugoslavia, not a single apparent or real political liberalisation (which came about as a result of the forced opening towards the West) changed the basic features of the dictatorship of the party state, while Tito rejected a real democratic solution, just like the leaders of other socialist federations (Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union). First of all, precisely because there was no democratic solution to the relations between the stateforming nations, Yugoslavia was only on the surface a »multicultural paradise«, while in reality it was torn apart by numerous serious contradictions.”

38 Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest*, 553–628; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2008*, 532–52; Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji*, 379–467.

39 Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest*, 528–51; Šokčević, *Hrvatska od stoljeća 7. do danas*, 518.

In this sense, Tito proved a successful statesman only in the short term, for the Second Yugoslavia survived him by but a brief span.⁴⁰

In the 1980s, Yugoslavia was once again shaken by a severe economic crisis, a development that accelerated the country's disintegration. Economic cooperation and trade among the republics declined sharply, while cultural ties also weakened. Within Croatia, the republican leadership during what came to be known as the "years of political apathy" was regarded as conservative and displayed little flexibility. The closing months of 1988 and the early weeks of 1989 witnessed the blossoming of organised opposition parties. By the end of 1989, even the League of Communists of Croatia had accepted the principle of a multiparty system, and in January 1990, following the example of the Slovenian communists protesting against centralisation, the Croatian delegation withdrew from the last congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia—a step that effectively marked the organisation's collapse. The new parties were primarily concerned with two issues: the introduction of political pluralism and the national question. Over time, a majority opinion crystallised within Croatian society that the republic's future did not lie within Yugoslavia, a view decisively expressed in the 1991 independence referendum.⁴¹

Beyond the economic factors and the aspiration to join the West, Croatian separatist ambitions were further fuelled by the rejection of Slobodan Milošević's centralising policies. At this stage, the federal leadership was no longer capable of balancing interethnic relations the way it had during Tito's era. Following the proclamation of Croatia's independence, a war of several years ensued, as the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbian paramilitary units launched offensives, partly citing the need to protect the Serb population in Croatia. The majority of Croatian Serbs aligned themselves with the policies of the Serbian homeland, making clear their refusal to recognise the new state authority, their unwillingness to live within an independent Croatia, and, invoking the principle of national self-determination, demanding changes to established borders. For a considerable period, the international community sought to preserve the unity of Yugoslavia. Only when repeated negotiations proved fruitless and the intensity of the fighting became undeniable did it accept the dissolution of Yugoslavia along republican borders, and extend recognition to Croatia's independence.⁴²

Zdenko Radelić identified the reasons behind the failure of the Yugoslav state as follows: the persistent national aspirations, the fear of cultural erosion, and the perception that Yugoslavia ultimately represented too great a compromise in terms

40 Šokčević, *Hrvatska od stoljeća 7. do danas*, 529.

41 Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest*, 749–77; Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji*, 579–98; Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2008*, 409–643; Goldstein, "Hrvatska i Hrvati u Jugoslaviji," 132–45.

42 Šokčević, *Hrvatska od stoljeća 7. do danas*, 540–49.

of national existence—one that its inhabitants eventually were unwilling to accept. As he put it:

“The new state of Yugoslavia was created in 1918 by fully formed nations, and during the time of their common history this new state did not and could not build a new Yugoslav nation. A true and genuine defender of Yugoslavia was not built. In other words, it will be shown that the lack of a common identity or, at least, common values is one of the essential reasons for the future disintegration of Yugoslavia. [...] When communism—Yugoslavia’s strongest cohesive force after 1945—collapsed, the nations remained: Croats with the desire to create an independent Croatian state and Serbs with the aspiration for a more unified and centralised Yugoslavia or, alternatively, an independent Serbia or a union of Serbian states within the borders determined by centuries of Serbian settlements. Other nations, led by the Slovenes, chose a similar path to the Croats, weighing how best to satisfy their economic and national interests.”⁴³

Slovenian statehood after World War II developed within the republican framework of the Yugoslav federal state. The second Yugoslavia was shaped by the dual vision of the Yugoslav communists, combining national self-determination with class-based revolutionary goals. As historian Zdenko Čepič notes:

“According to the principle of the federal system of the Yugoslav state, the Republic of Slovenia, like all the other republics, had its own legislative body, the Assembly, its own government, as well as its own national communist organisation, which had been established in 1937. However, despite all of the Slovenian bodies of state authority the most important politics was created and managed in Belgrade, in accordance with revolutionary statism and centralism. Slovenia only enjoyed considerable independence in the field of culture and education, as no federal ministries existed for these areas. In this sense the nations were independent, while the central authorities or the federal ministries were in charge of all other aspects of the functioning of the state and the lives of the Yugoslav citizens. In the first post-war period the opposition between the federal principle and centralist practice did not appear to be problematic.”⁴⁴

Unlike in Croatia or Serbia, where bourgeois parties demonstrated more visible resistance to communist consolidation, post-war Slovenia saw relatively limited political opposition. However, signs of dissent emerged in the economic sphere.

43 Radelić, “Hrvatska i Jugoslavija,” 766.

44 Čepič, “The Time of Tito’s Yugoslavia,” 187.

In the 1945 elections, some Slovenian regions recorded a notably high proportion of blank ballots—far exceeding the Yugoslav average—indicating latent dissatisfaction with the People's Front. The first overt tensions between Ljubljana and the federal government arose over economic and financial policy. The Communist leadership's push for rapid centralisation, including the creation of state-wide enterprises and the imposition of detailed regulatory frameworks, provoked resistance from Slovenian republican ministries. These ministries objected to side-lining republican competencies in favour of Belgrade's centralised planning apparatus.⁴⁵

Following the decisive break with the Soviet Union in 1948, Yugoslavia embarked on a path of political and social transformation. The introduction of the self-management system in the early 1950s marked a radical shift in post-war development. A more modern form of socialism emerged for Yugoslavia, in contrast to the practice in the Soviet Union, despite the regime's frequent vacillation between more liberal and more authoritarian positions. Despite these reforms, the League of Communists retained its unchallenged ideological and political supremacy. The decentralising pressure did result in increased powers for the republics and municipalities, particularly in economic and cultural matters. However, the Communist elite and their subordinate officials continued to dominate decision-making. These changes could have little effect, given that the ruling Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) did not change considerably, remaining a hierarchical and authoritarian organisation.⁴⁶

Although Yugoslav leaders insisted that the national question had been definitively resolved after World War II, ethnic and republican tensions resurfaced in the 1960s. The economic boom of the previous decade was stalling, prompting calls for reform and new development strategies. Slovenia emerged as a leading advocate for market-oriented reforms, pushing for greater economic liberalisation and decentralisation. Some of these reforms were implemented locally, reflecting the republic's desire for increased autonomy in managing its economic affairs. At the November 1965 session of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the most prominent Slovenian party leader, Edvard Kardelj, advocated for a fundamental reform of the Yugoslav federation. He proposed that the republics should be granted full sovereignty, while the federal government would serve merely as a technical coordinating body. The longstanding debate between centralism and federalism was ultimately resolved in favour of the latter—symbolised by the removal of Aleksandar Ranković from the leadership. The subsequent constitutional reforms expanded the rights and competencies of the republics. However, the accompanying economic reforms failed to fully meet expectations.⁴⁷

45 Štih, Simoniti, and Vodopivec, *A Slovene History*, 454.

46 Štih, Simoniti, and Vodopivec, *A Slovene History*, 465.

47 Čepič, "The Time of Tito's Yugoslavia," 193.

The first major public conflict between Slovenia and the Yugoslav federal centre erupted over the so-called “road issue.” Despite prior approval, the federal government ultimately refused to support Slovenia’s request for a loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) to improve its road infrastructure. Instead, it prioritised road development projects in Serbia and Montenegro. This decision sparked outrage in the Slovenian press and public discourse, which condemned the federal government and voiced concerns that Slovenia was unable to assert its interests within the federation. The central leadership, in turn, viewed Slovenia’s actions as a threat to Yugoslav unity. It also rejected Slovenia’s broader economic vision. Slovenian Prime Minister Stane Kavčič not only sought to liberalise the party—an idea that had supporters in other republics—but also aimed to modernise the economy. He advocated for the rapid development of the service sector and the introduction of alternative forms of ownership alongside the dominant model of social property. Kavčič emphasised the importance of strengthening economic ties between Slovenia and Western European countries. In the early 1970s, Kavčič, like other liberal-minded Croatian and Serbian leaders, was removed from office. His dismissal marked the limits of reformist ambitions within the federation and underscored the federal centre’s resistance to decentralisation and liberalisation.⁴⁸

Despite the political friction and economic disputes with the federal centre, the 1960s and 1970s were marked by relatively favourable social and economic conditions in Slovenia. As historian Vodopivec observed,

“The 1960s and 1970s in particular were marked by relatively favourable social and economic conditions, and Slovenia is believed—despite the dissatisfaction of its politicians and population with federal economic and financial policies—to have developed into a modern industrial society precisely in the time of the second Yugoslavia.”⁴⁹

Following Tito’s death in 1980, interethnic relations within Yugoslavia were shifting, and within just over a decade, the state disintegrated. Slovenian historiography has long grappled with the question of why Tito was able to hold Yugoslavia together, and why the federation unravelled so quickly after his passing. Analyses of his more than three decades of leadership consider multiple dimensions: his pivotal role in the anti-fascist liberation movement, his international stature as a respected statesman, and his autocratic methods of governance. Tito simultaneously led the state,

48 “The ‘Road Affair’ was the clearest manifestation of the aspirations for the ‘liberalisation’ of the relations in the Yugoslav state and the Slovenian society.” Čepič, “The Time of Tito’s Yugoslavia,” 198.

49 Vodopivec, “Slovene Historiography,” 107–8.

the Communist Party, and the military, which granted him extensive and centralised authority. Moreover, the geopolitical context of the Cold War—where Yugoslavia occupied a unique non-aligned position—reinforced the stability of his regime.

From the perspective of Slovenian history, it is often emphasised that during the intra-party struggles of the mid-1960s, Tito sided with the federalists—thereby not only shaping the federation's trajectory but also preserving his own authority and power. Yet, one of the most pressing questions, according to Božo Repe, is whether Tito genuinely improved interethnic relations or merely “froze” the underlying tensions through his personal authority and the political practices of the socialist system, postponing an inevitable collapse. Repe argues that while a confederation based on mutual agreement might have offered a theoretical solution, this model was fundamentally incompatible with the essence of Titoism:

“However, this path would not be a socialist state, and the revolution carried out after the war would lose its meaning, while Tito would lose his integrative function.”

In this view, Tito's leadership was both a stabilising force and a barrier to deeper structural reform. His integrative role depended on a centralised, revolutionary legacy that resisted pluralistic or negotiated alternatives.⁵⁰

From the 1980s onwards, Slovenians were viewing Yugoslavia with increasingly mixed emotions. The growing assertiveness of Serbian centralist policies sparked concern, while the longstanding worries about German and Italian influence—so prevalent in earlier periods—had largely dissipated. Amid a deepening economic crisis, Slovenian society experienced a marked shift toward the West, both culturally and politically. A widespread perception emerged that Yugoslavia was hindering rather than enabling Slovenia's development. During this period, various proposals circulated on how to democratise the system and make the Yugoslav state structure more efficient.

“The Slovene political leadership was unable in the first half of the 1980s to create a »national programme« of its own that would define its relationship with the federation in detail. [...] However, the public opinion in Slovenia in the mid-1980s was still very contradictory: on the one hand it was critical of the Communist authorities, the wavering and irresolute nature of Slovene politics and the federal pressures, while on the other hand it was still in favour of a solution for the political and economic crisis within the framework of the existing political system and the state of Yugoslavia.”⁵¹

50 Repe, “Tito kot tretja »institucija«,” 427.

51 Štih, Simoniti, and Vodopivec, *A Slovene History*, 524.

In the 1980s, tensions between the Yugoslav republics intensified dramatically. The clash between opposing visions reached a level of brutality and intransigence unprecedented in the history of the Yugoslav federal state. The Serbian and Slovenian party leaderships held fundamentally divergent views on the nature and organisation of the Yugoslav community. The new Serbian political elite sought to leverage the size of the Serbian population to assert dominance over Yugoslavia, invoking the principle of “democracy” through the formula of one person, one vote. This approach would have dismantled the very foundation of the federal system—namely, the equality of nations—by granting the Serbs the largest representation in the federal assembly. Serbia aimed to dominate Yugoslavia much like it had attempted in 1918, though the creation of a Greater Serbia—often referred to as “Srboslavija”—ultimately failed at that time. Drawing a historical parallel, historian Čepič argues that “Milošević wanted to complete the work or desires of Nikola Pašić, whose goal was for Yugoslavia to become an enlarged Serbia.” The Slovenians emerged as the leading force resisting this renewed centralisation, soon joined by the Croats. By then, both republics had already undergone significant democratisation and distanced themselves from Yugoslavia, a process in which anti-communist and nationalist political forces played a decisive role.⁵²

By the late 1980s, the gap in attitudes toward the Yugoslav federation had disappeared between the significantly rejuvenated Slovenian party leadership and the opposition intellectuals. As early as 1987, the journal *Nova Revija* openly advocated for Slovenia’s withdrawal from the Yugoslav federation and the creation of an independent Slovenian nation-state. By the end of 1989, the leaders of the League of Communists of Slovenia—who had by then embraced political pluralism—had also come to see independence as the only viable solution to both the economic and political crises, particularly as a way to escape Serbia’s centralising ambitions. By the turn of the decade, a broad consensus had emerged within Slovenian society regarding the necessity of independence. The newly formed Slovenian government, elected in the first multiparty elections of 1990, continued to actively prepare for the country’s secession from Yugoslavia.⁵³

Conclusion

Among current national historiographies, the Serbian narrative remains the most attached to the former Yugoslav state, perceiving its existence as having intrinsic value. This is understandable, as never before or since have so many Serbs lived

52 Čepič, “Bilo je nekoč v Jugoslaviji,” 50–51.

53 Čepič, “The Time of Tito’s Yugoslavia,” 183–202; Repe, “Slovenija i Slovenci u Jugoslaviji,” 187–99; Repe, *Jutri je nov dan*.

within a single state as they did in Yugoslavia, and at various points they were able to secure a leading role. Slovenian historians tend to view the decades spent within Yugoslavia as a stage in their national development, acknowledging several positive aspects of the period. They emphasise Slovenia's primary objective: to find a way to secure the most favourable position within a (con)federal framework. In both Yugoslav states, there were influential leaders committed to the state's existence (Korošec, Kardelj). Croatian historiography, by contrast, expresses little to no nostalgia for Yugoslavia, finding few positive contributions to Croatian national development. The resistance to centralism and Serbian dominance—often the central theme of Croatian political discourse—is frequently reflected in the titles and chapter headings of historical writings. Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Bosnians have also produced their own assessments, which could be the subject of a separate study. This paper may serve as further evidence—echoing Emil Niederhauser's emphasis—that the national question remains a defining factor in Eastern Europe.⁵⁴

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54 This study is based on the presentation delivered at the commemorative conference *Nation, Statehood, and Historiography in East- and East-Central Europe*, organised on the occasion of Emil Niederhauser's 100th birthday (Budapest, ELTE, September 28–29, 2023).

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