



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on January 31, 2012

The 66th Anniversary of Tito's Yugoslavia

The nation of Yugoslavia was a creature of the Versailles Treaty, first cobbled together out of the remnants of the old Austro-Hungarian empire and the nations of Serbia and Montenegro. Serbia itself included ethnic minorities such as Slovenes and Croats. These people did not speak the same language or share the same religious confessions. They were simply defined as "South Slavs," who were put together to create a nation that it was hoped would contain imagined future threats to peace and to reward Serbia, one of the victors in World War I.



This first Yugoslavian nation was a kingdom, and it quickly became a rival of fascist Italy and was for a time a de facto ally of Nazi Germany (which, until Germany absorbed the buffer state of Austria in 1938, was more a rival of Italy than an ally). By 1929, King Alexander had banned all political parties in order to contain the natural centrifugal pressures of this unnatural polity. He was assassinated in 1934, indicating just how strongly the different nationalities within Yugoslavia desired their own states.

The problems of Yugoslavia were replicated throughout Europe, whether the idea was that "bigger is better" or that placing different people within a larger nation was wise statesmanship. Almost from the start, these ideas did not work. For instance, Czechoslovakia — often presented in history as a model nation — was pure invention. The architects of Czechoslovakia took the historically Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, added to them the Slovak people, and then threw in over three million Sudeten Germans. This polyglot, artificial creature had a functioning democracy, significant liberty, and a robust army; however, half its citizens had no desire to remain in Czechoslovakia. Hitler was given an easy chance to add territory to his Reich by demanding that the Sudetenland be allowed to join Germany, which most Sudetenland Germans wanted. Less noticed but just as important was the fact that the five million Slovaks in the eastern third of the nation were just as adamant about ending their forced association with their Czech brethren.

Both Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were invaded and occupied by the Nazis in World War II, with Hitler taking full advantage of the simmering animosities among different peoples forced into one nation. In both Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the indigenous Communist Party members originally trumpeted the virtues of collaboration with the Nazis. That hidden but vital fact of history — the strong political, as well as military and economic, alliance between Bolsheviks and Nazis throughout the world — was profoundly true in central Europe. Tito — later an opponent of Hitler, after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 — was initially a cheerleader for Nazism.

After Germany invaded Yugoslavia in May 1941, and after that, Russia, the whole attitude of communists around the world spun 180 degrees. Instead of railing against "Western plutocrats" (e.g., Britain), communist propaganda attacked the "German Fascists" or "Hiterlites" (although never, ever, the "National Socialists" — an outlawed term which if even spoken or written in public could earn one a



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trip to the Gulag).

When the war ended, the Red Army was sitting astride half of Europe. Stalin kept the three Baltic states, Bessarabia (part of Romania seized during the alliance with the Nazis), much of Poland, and the slice of Finland taken during the Winter War. Docile governments in Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria were established. Additionally, the “Russian Zone” of Germany — which would later become the Democratic Republic of Germany (East Germany) — was placed under Walter Ulbrich, the man who a few years earlier had attacked the British for fighting the Nazis.

Czechoslovakia would survive in a shadowy independence until 1948, when full Stalinist rule was imposed. Albania, which had borders with only Greece and Yugoslavia and which had been an Italian Fascist possession, remained Marxist but notionally free of the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia, which never joined the Warsaw Pact and was not occupied by the Red Army, formed on [January 31, 1946](#) under strongman Josip Broz Tito (pictured above) as the Yugoslavian Federal Socialist Republic, a one-party communist dictatorship, but notionally freer from the mandates of Moscow.

It was out of Yugoslavia that [Milovan Djilas](#), a principal lieutenant of Tito, soon became one of the most vociferous critics of communism in power and in 1957 wrote the seminal work, [The New Class](#), which exposed from the inside how the statists who ran Marxist Yugoslavia were no better than a superimposition of earlier aristocratic classes, and that the communists who ran the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations were no different in the stark division between the ordinary subjects and the communist elites. Djilas condemned the Soviet crushing of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. He survived Tito by 15 years and witnessed the disintegration of Yugoslavia before his death.

When the Warsaw Pact dissolved in 1989, nine years after Tito died, the six nations that formed Yugoslavia stayed together for a short while in a shaky alliance. Then, just as Lithuanians and Ukrainians sought to separate themselves from the Great Russians of the Soviet Union, so the Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, and Macedonians each sought independence from the hegemony of the Serbians. What has followed has been a period of bloodshed in which Muslim Bosnians have killed, raped, and plundered Serbian Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Serbians have done the same to Bosnians.

In some instances the disintegration of Yugoslavia was relatively bloodless, as with Slovenia (just as the “Velvet Divorce” which ended the wholly artificial union of Czechs and Slovaks was essentially bloodless) and the conflict that ended with a new Republic of Slovenia was called the “Ten Days War.” In other cases, such as the battles between Serbs and Bosnians, the conflicts are hundreds of years old, and outside intervention on one side or the other — as with the American participation in NATO’s undeclared war on Serbia — simply increases the violence.

Yugoslavia — a grand failure of a government to preside over a variety of peoples who never wanted to be joined together — ought to be a warning to the world of the risks of hyper-centralism. Nations with different peoples living together peacefully are almost invariably found in places with a great deal of personal liberty and decentralization of power down to the level of a confederacy, such as in Switzerland. No Slovaks today pine about not being Czechoslovakians, and no Slovenians regret not being joined to Serbians. There is a reason why: Liberty is a natural impulse and that yearning is met most easily when government is strongly limited.

Photo: Josip Broz Tito



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