



Constructions of Identity and War: A Reciprocal Relationship in Former Yugoslavia

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the reciprocal relationship between identity and conflict, focusing the inquiry on the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the resulting Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. A brief history of nationalist sentiment under communist rule in Yugoslavia is first displayed to contextualize the scope of research. The focus then shifts to how constructions of ethnonationalist identity became the basis of brutal ethnic conflict. Identity as the root of conflict is first discussed theoretically from an international relations perspective, citing the breakdown of a multinational state and the subsequent security dilemma. It is then grounded empirically in real-world evidence, illustrating how power imbalances between the republics and powerful ethnonationalist rhetoric led the region to war. The research then transitions to the secondary and complementary component of the thesis: how conflict shapes identity. The discussion cites incongruent narratives of war among the former republics as well as the tarnished international image of former Yugoslavia. Through a display of relevant evidence and literature, this argument strives to illustrate the power of identity in conflict, unity, and the nation. Further research could address how the weaponization of ethnicity could be avoided and reversed in favor of a stronger sense of collective identity around shared sociopolitical values and ideals.

1. INTRODUCTION

In academic studies of the relationship between war and the construction of identity, the violent breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) is at the forefront of the literature. A geographically expansive, culturally diverse, and politically non-aligned federation that existed from 1918 to 1991, the SFRY mirrors the entire Balkans in its identity as a geopolitical crossroads of culture, history, and politics (United Nations Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia [UN-ICTY], 2017). However, the former country of Yugoslavia has a unique history of ethnonational conflict following the collapse of a multinational state; organized political division,

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propagated by the nationalist rhetoric of powerful political leaders, eroded the concept of a common Yugoslav identity, fueled fear and mistrust between ethnic groups, and accelerated the collapse of the union (UN-ICTY, 2017). The wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo throughout the 1990s were consequences of these opposing nationalist movements, and they demonstrate the central role that constructions of national identity played in the conflicts that took place during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s (McConnell, 2017).

This paper will hence explore how identity constructions in Yugoslavia shaped this era of conflict in the 1990s, as well as how these conflicts, in turn, were shaped by identity. With a timeline of inquiry from the beginning of the federation in 1918 to the end of the Yugoslav Wars at the turn of the twenty-first century, this essay will strive to analyze relevant research and reach a meaningful conclusion about the power of identity in national agendas.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF NATIONALISM IN YUGOSLAVIA

It is necessary to first outline the role of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, which was an experiment in a multinational state. It comprised six republics, each with their own national identity: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia (including the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina), and Slovenia (UN-ICTY, 2017). The communist political party, in power in Yugoslavia from 1918-1991, recognized the ethnonational diversity of the Yugoslav demographic, but the predominant belief among party leaders was that equality-based policies and communist hegemony would allow nationalism to “exist, mature, and finally diminish as a political force without jeopardizing political stability and economic development” (Sekulić et al., 1994, p. 83). In short, a shared political agenda, societal modernization, and supranational identity were expected to weaken nationalism.

Despite these expectations, the political and economic rivalries that eventually arose between the Yugoslav republics intensified rather than lessened nationalist feelings (Sekulić et al., 1994, p. 83). The central government weakened while militant nationalism grew, and organized political division was fueled by nationalist rhetoric from leaders like Slobodan Milošević, who turned his promises made to fellow Serbs into “actions that caused blood and ruins” (UN-ICTY, 2017 & Bozic, 1992, p. 10). These influences eroded the concept of a common Yugoslav identity, fueled fear and mistrust between ethnic groups, and accelerated the collapse of the union. By the early 1990s, the Yugoslav experiment saw open hostility and warfare among the South Slavs, marking the start of a long decade of war (Sekulić et al., 1994, p. 83). For context, the following images (Figure 1) illustrate the geopolitical changes that took place from 1991 to 2008 in the former Yugoslavia (UN-ICTY, 2017).

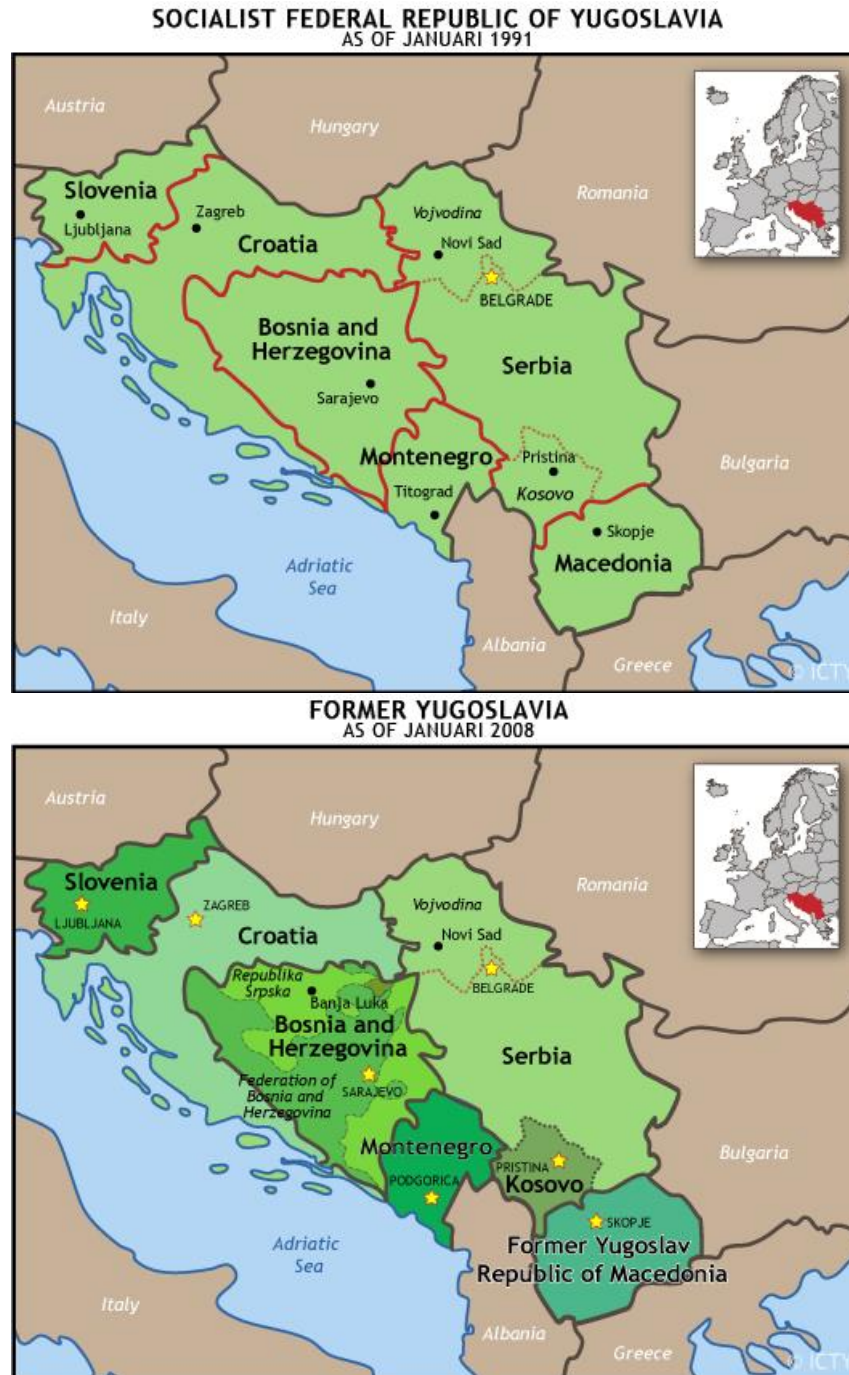


Figure 1: Geopolitical changes in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2008.

While the different ethnic groups in pre-war Yugoslavia were not necessarily “poised on the verge of ‘ancient hatreds’ held tenuously in check for four decades only by the strong arm of Father Tito,” it was these nationalist sentiments that pushed the state toward internal conflict and eventual full-scale war (Wilmer, 2002, p. 8). This era of political violence and the nationalism that fueled it contextualize this essay’s research focus: how identity brought the Yugoslav Wars to fruition, and then how these conflicts shaped identity construction in turn.

3. IDENTITY CAUSING WAR

3.1. THEORETICAL INQUIRIES

Regarding the question of how identity becomes divisive in a multinational state when federal leadership dissolves, scholarship from an international relations perspective supplies structural, macro-level insights. For this reason, theories on ethnic conflict will first be explored. Posen (1993) uses Yugoslavia's breakdown of order and the consequent violence to epitomize the security dilemma, a model in realist theory that explains how proximate groups of people under conditions of anarchy suddenly find themselves responsible for their own security (national, political, human, or otherwise). His work supports the notion that when a multiethnic state breaks down, its ethnic subgroups see other identities as offensive threats, resulting in division, mistrust, and eventual violence.

Specifically, Posen (1993, p. 37) explains that a history of brutal conflict between Croats and Serbs that went back hundreds of years, the offensive push to "rescue" nationals who were "marooned" in other republics, the disparity of power between the republics, and violent groups of extremist fanatics contributed the most to the violence. In this way, Posen's argument provides four factors that explain the rise of ethnic conflict when Yugoslavia collapsed. However, this essay strives to take his reasoning further by proposing that his four reasons for conflict share a common link: a sense of shared identity. Each of Posen's (1993) four factors can hence be reframed using the lens of identity. Centuries-old oral and cultural traditions of Croat-Serb warfare fueled their continued animosity; a sense of consanguine brotherhood with "stranded" nationals justified various homelands' rescue efforts; the perceived power differential between republics threatened nationalist rhetoric, which championed ethnonational superiority; destructive bands of impassioned fanatics united under supernationalist banners on the basis of shared identities. Reframing Posen's (1993) reasons for ethnic conflict as the consequences of clashing national identities supports the notion that issues of identity led directly to war in Yugoslavia.

3.2. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

To follow this theoretical line of reasoning, strong empirical evidence supports that the Yugoslav Wars were predominantly the consequences of the rise of conflicting nationalist movements and identities (McConnell, 2017). Ethnic nationalism had always been present in the Yugoslav federation, but it was kept under control while the communist dictator Joseph Broz (Tito) was in power. After his death in 1980, however, there was neither a method nor a framework for resolution in place, and cross-national conflicts became everyday occurrences (Bozic, 1992). In short, ethnic conflicts based on identity were bubbling to the surface and altering inter-ethnic relations. Rising Croat bitterness against Belgrade is a distinct example of how political tensions became realized (Bozic, 1992). The Croats' perception of Serbia as an unequal state fueled ethnic division, and the exacerbated power imbalance between Serbia and the other republics eventually became a focal point of the Yugoslav Wars. Additionally, an "Islamic assertion in Bosnia and Herzegovina" represented demographic changes that affected ethnic balance and further destabilized social attitudes (Bozic, 1992, p. 51). The changing ethnic makeup of the republics

signified the breakdown of traditional society that followed the breakdown of the state. Moreover, these changes accelerated the political tensions in the 1980s rooted in “nationalist passions,” as named by Bozic (1992, p. 51). Each of these societal changes that arose after the collapse of Yugoslavia can be seen as a consequence of ethnic tension as well as a catalyst for the ethnic conflicts that followed.

Moreover, the nationalist rhetoric of Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian leader charged with war crimes and genocide at the turn of the twenty-first century, is a strong indication of identity as the basis of nationalism and war. Milošević, the so-called “Butcher of the Balkans,” was notorious for propaganda campaigns that emphasized alleged injustices against Serbs and portrayed them as victims of the rest of Yugoslavia (Bozic, 1992, p. 72). Ideas of Serbian nationalism and traditional culture, based on the “purity and nobility of the peasant character” which Milošević championed, are popularly seen as the biggest cause of the Yugoslav Wars (Boškovic, 2005, p. 10). The populist and nationalist rhetoric used by Milošević serves as evidence for how identity constructions led to conflict, and this can be seen in how Serbian nationalism directly fueled Serbian militant aggression.

This Serbian nationalist rhetoric finally exploded in spring 1991 when this issue of “maltreated Serbs” provided the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army with a cause to fight, and they consequently started a war in Croatia (Bozic, 1992, p. 118). This is a strong example of how identity can cause conflict as perceptions of ethnic superiority fueled these nationalist military campaigns. This historical event, which is widely accepted as a consequence of Serbia’s desire for Croatian territory that was supposedly inhabited by a Serbian majority, marked the beginning of a “long and tragically unequal war” (Bozic, 1992, p. 72). Prominent analysts of the Yugoslav conflict maintain that the civil war that started in 1991 was largely the logical outcome of Milošević’s proposed policies, and this is evidence that identity-based ethnonationalist rhetoric was a major force of conflict in the Yugoslav Wars.

4. WAR’S IMPACT ON IDENTITY

4.1. INCONGRUENT NARRATIVE

As this paper has shown, perceptions of identity and nationalism can become weaponized, purposefully or passively, to incite conflict between ethnic groups and tear down multinational states. However, the relationship between identity and conflict is not one-sided; it is dialectical. Identity construction and war shape each other, and this section will illustrate how the latter influenced the former during the Yugoslav Wars.

The first example can be found in how the post-war Yugoslav republics do not share a unified narrative about the wars of the 1990s. There is still external blame for the cause of the Yugoslav Wars in Serbia, widespread contention over the dual identity of Croats as both victims and perpetrators, and vastly different stereotypes assigned (both outwardly and inwardly) to “the ‘barbaric’ Serbs and the ‘civilized’ Croats” (Boškovic, 2005, pp. 10-12). These examples illustrate how perceptions of the perpetrators and victims of violence vary widely across the region. This is

particularly true in the case of Croats and Serbs, who adamantly blame each other for the brutal ethnic violence that took place and maintain strongly opposing perspectives regarding the cause of the conflicts. The mutually exclusive nature of the respective views put forth by Croatia and Serbia is further indicated in their contrasting collective narratives, their antipodal holidays to commemorate war events, and their ethnicity-tailored history textbooks, to give a few examples (Baranović, 2001). Each of these three listed elements is a component of identity construction that changed following the war, supporting how the conflicts of the 1990s shaped national identity-building.

Additionally, Slovenia has been largely excluded from the conceptualization of Yugoslavia and even from the entire Balkans region, and their national identity construction reflects a desire for distance from the other former republics — a case study that provides more insight into how war shapes identity (Boškovic, 2005). Slovenia's minor role in the Yugoslav Wars spared the country most of the destruction that happened elsewhere, and the country consequently gained significant cultural and political clout on the global stage for this ostensible display of wartime restraint (Boškovic, 2005). Boškovic (2005) argues that this lent a sense of “civility” to Slovene identity, and Slovenia was seen to belong to a “more civilized” group of nations rather than to war-torn Yugoslavia (p. 12). This shift in Slovene national identity took place as a direct result of the conflicts of the 1990s, which supports how Slovenia's role in the conflict directly shaped their national identity.

However, Boškovic's assertion of Slovenian civility can be extended: Slovenia did not passively receive this “civil” image, but rather actively pursued it. Slovenia desired a national reputation that embodied their civility, proved their modernity, and, most importantly, differentiated their narrative from those of the other former Yugoslav republics, which the world associated with chaos and war. Šarić (2004, p. 391) provides direct quotes from Slovene media sources to show the “systematic distancing of Slovenia from the Balkans in its media,” which this argument identifies as Slovenia “Othering” the rest of the Balkans. Slovenia's political distancing from the rest of the Balkans can be also seen in politicians who “fiercely reject any connection with the [Balkan] region” (Boškovic, 2005, p. 8) and the media's support for a self-image in which “[Slovenia's] position is somewhere outside the Balkans” (Šarić, 2004, p. 396). These examples are clear indications of how Slovenia actively strove to create its own narrative of peace and civility in order to escape association with the Yugoslav Wars. In summary, both Slovenia's internationally granted and internally created self-image of civility in the wake of the conflicts of the 1990s demonstrate how war is formative in identity construction.

4.2. INTERNATIONAL IMAGE

The second way in which the Yugoslav Wars impacted Southern Slavic identity involves the altered international reputation of Yugoslavia and the Balkans as a whole. The international community (as well much of the former Yugoslavia itself) largely agrees that the violence, wars, and ethnic cleansing that took place were characterized by disturbing acts of horror, brutality, and genocide (Wilmer, 2002). This perception has created a negative image of the region overall, depicting the modern republics as places of danger and instability. Yugoslavia became

“increasingly associated with blood and violence... [causing] individuals who could identify themselves with the Balkans to feel guilty of violence” as well (Šarić, 2004, p. 39).

This overwhelmingly negative shift in how the Balkans were viewed by the world evidently instilled collective feelings of shame, despite the incongruent narratives within the former Yugoslavia about which republic or ethnic subgroup was responsible for the violence. This essay highlights this duality—regional guilt existing alongside ethnic-divided narratives— as a testament to the power of war in shaping human identity. Victims, perpetrators, and proximate bystanders alike, although rarely divided along such clean lines in the chaos of war, felt the impact of war on their national and personal identities regardless of their role. Identifying with the region was enough to generate guilt, regardless of their individual nationality or ethnicity. This association between the Balkan region and collective wrongdoing aligns with evidence from Šarić (2004, p. 402, 397) that cites the journalistic term “the Balkan syndrome” to describe something characterized by “unruliness, intractability, and savagery.” Evidently, the conflicts that took place in the Balkan region in the 1990s transformed the self-perceptions of those who identified with the region, and the shame surrounding the violent wars that arose independently of ethnonationality illustrates a direct representation of war’s capacity to change identity.

The concept of “Europeanization” also plays a formative role in this discourse about post-war national identity. As stated by a Macedonian media outlet, the Balkan region “is in Europe and it is not in Europe at the same time” (Šarić, 2004, p. 395). This duality of identity for the Balkan states presents the republics of the former Yugoslavia with two choices: identify either with Europe or with other Balkan countries. This paper proposes that the outcome of this choice largely determines whether the country in question embarks on a “European trajectory” (Subotic, 2011, p. 309) or remains in Balkan “barbarity and savagery” (Šarić, 2004, p. 391). This ostensible decision between connecting to “civilized” Europe or stagnating with other “savage” Balkan states represents how Balkan countries — and subsequently, the identities they contain — are seen as the starting point with Europe as the end-goal. In deciding between Europeanization and Balkanization, the former option has been unquestionably chosen by Croatia and Slovenia, the two Balkan countries with identities and norms that closely resemble Europe (Subotic, 2011, p. 309) and whose media regularly label the Balkans as “the opposite of the international environment” (Šarić, 2004, p. 391, 404). Croatia and Slovenia are also the only former Yugoslav republics to have become members of the European Union (Communication Department of the European Commission, 2020), representing their rejection of the Balkans. Both countries symbolically choose Europe over the rest of their region as a consequence of how the Yugoslav Wars characterized Balkan identity, illuminating the formative role of war in national identity construction.

A display of qualities associated with these two respective regions is found in the image below from Šarić (2004, p. 403), titled “Otherness and Inequality” (Table 1).

Table 1. The left column, titled *The Balkans*, describes the Balkan region which includes the former Yugoslav republics, and the right, titled *The non-Balkan world*, essentially represents the values and qualities of Europe and the West.

<i>The Balkans</i>	<i>The non-Balkan world</i>
Instability	Stability
Chaos	Order
Irrationality	Common sense
Crime/corruption	Honesty
Illegality	Legality
Barbarism	Civilisation

This display of traits, arranged in oppositional pairs that connote heavily valenced levels of worth, labels Balkan identity (and by default the former Yugoslav identity) as the “Other” of Europe. Šarić (2004, p. 391) directly supports that discourse about the “barbarity of the Balkans and the need for intervention helped create a sense of common identity and purpose in the European Union,” which affirms the Balkan-Europe identity dichotomy as a direct result of the violent Yugoslav Wars. This notion is validated again by the recent political rebranding campaigns that have taken place in Yugoslavia, ostensibly motivated by “the need to disassociate from the recent past and from regional instability, and to emphasize a ‘Europeanness’” (Hall, 2001, p. 326). In short, both the international and the Balkan community support that the Yugoslav Wars tainted the international reputation of the entire Balkan region. The wars symbolically separated the Balkans from the rest of Europe and consequently galvanized some of the former Yugoslav republics into choosing a European political trajectory and national identity, which demonstrates the capacity of conflict to profoundly change identity construction.

5. CONCLUSION

This exploration of the role of identity in the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia has shown considerable support for identity as the basis of brutal ethnic conflict. A brief history of nationalist sentiments and movements during and immediately following the rule of Tito was first described to contextualize the research focus. Then, foundational processes in which identity can lead to war were studied theoretically from an international relations perspective and illustrated empirically as real-world conflicts that stemmed from ethnic differences. The ways in which war impacts identity were further discussed using discrepant narratives from the 1990s that still carry weight in the present, and the international image of the former Yugoslavia, from the perspective of both the former Yugoslavs and the rest of the world, was analyzed.

Through illuminating how organized political division and nationalism delegitimized the common Yugoslav identity in favor of specific ethnonational ones, this paper has delved into the dynamic relationship between ethnic-group identity and the basis of conflict in the region. Yugoslavia’s long history of internal warfare, selective nationalist unity across borders, ethnicity-

based power disparities, and violent ethnic subgroups resulted in the rise of nationalism and precipitated the violence that followed. These conflicts then led to contradictory political histories, a damaged reputation of the region, and negative self-perceptions within the former Yugoslav republics.

This exploration of identity and conflict has therefore illustrated the power of identity in conflict, unity, and the role of the self in the nation, which are wholly essential topics in the study of peace and war. Further research should focus on how the weaponization of ethnicity could be avoided and reversed. There are also gaps in the literature about how animosity could be replaced by a stronger sense of collective identity potentially revolving around shared values and ideals. The violence that occurred upon the collapse of Yugoslavia should serve as an example of how a multinational state can devolve into chaos and destruction without direction, and it is the job of both the global academic community and the world's great powers to learn from this tragic era of war and better pursue the human mission of peace-building.

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