

A PILLAR OF THE YUGOSLAV REGIME: SOME ASPECTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE PARTY AND THE ARMED FORCES

A JUGOSZLÁV RENDSZER PILLÉRE: AZ ÁLLAMPÁRT ÉS A FEGYVERES ERŐK VISZONYÁNAK NÉHÁNY ASPEKTUSA

The armed forces were crucially important and influential in the particular socialist system of Yugoslavia that came to dissolve in a series of armed conflicts. Its representatives held key positions in the Communist Party leadership, while the party organisation operating within the army was de facto an independent entity. To understand how instrumental the military was in the disintegration of the country, it is essential to review the dynamics of the relationship between the state party and the armed forces. This paper aims to explore some fundamental characteristics of the Yugoslav civil-military relations spanning from the beginning to the 1980-s.

A fegyveres konfliktusok sorozatával megszűnt Jugoszlávia sajátos szocialista rendszerében kiemelkedően fontos volt a fegyveres erők szerepe. Képviselői helyet kaptak a kommunista párt irányításában, a fegyveres erőkben működő pártszervezet pedig gyakorlatilag önálló entitás volt. Ahhoz, hogy megértsük, milyen szerepet játszott a hadsereg az ország szétesésének folyamatában, fontos áttekintenünk a párt és a fegyveres erők viszonyának alakulását. A tanulmány a jugoszláv civil-katonai kapcsolatok néhány alapvető vonását mutatja be a kezdetektől a '80-as évekig.

In dictatorial, totalitarian, and authoritarian systems, the function of the armed forces is not limited to guaranteeing the security and defence of the state and the society against foreign aggression but also extends to ensuring survival of the regime.¹ This was no different in Yugoslavia. Pursuant to Article 240 of the Constitution, the armed forces shall defend the country's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and social structure as laid down by the Constitution.²

The military had been inextricably intertwined with the party already in World War II, thus before the formation of the second Yugoslavia.³ The party exercised tight control over the army, and carried out extensive military cleansing during the split with the USSR. The institution's loyalty to the regime was consequently indisputable, with Josip Broz Tito relying on military assistance to consolidate his power at times of crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In post-Tito Yugoslavia, the stability of the system rested on four pillars:⁴ 1) the personality cult to maintain Tito's idolised image in collective memory, 2) the socialist self-management system, 3) the Communist Party, and 4) the Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslovenska narodna armija, hereinafter referred to as JNA). During the 1980-s, these foundations began to erode more and more rapidly. Tito's personality cult⁵ morphed into a bureaucratic dogma that was increasingly

¹ Davor Marijan: Rukovođenje i komandovanje Oružanim snagama SFRJ: Vrhovna razina; Časopis za suvremenu povijest, 3/2009, Zagreb

² Ustav Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije; in.: Ustav Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije – Ustavni zakon za sprovođenje Ustava Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije – Ekspoze Predsednika Savezne skupštine – Registar pojmova; Savremena administracija, Beograd, 1974

³ Manojlovic, Milorad: The Role of the Military in Politics: Yugoslavia As A Case Study; Simon Fraser University, 1997

⁴ Vreme: Jugoslovenska narodna armija 1989-1992 – kratka istorija sloma: Armija Partije; 11.10.2001., 562th issue

⁵ The most popular catchphrase of the era was: 'After Tito comes Tito'. („I posle Tita – Tito")

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difficult to uphold, whereas socialist self-management failed to resolve both the economic crisis (partly generated by the self-management system itself) and the social tensions arising therefrom.

Not even the Communist Party, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (Savez komunista Jugoslavije – SKJ) was immune to the impact of federalisation. Although, according to the official position, SKJ bodies were ruled by the principle of democratic centralism, they were effectively a federation of communist parties operating in the republics, provinces, and the army. The party headquarters functioned as federal party headquarters, and decision-making was based on consensus between the member parties.⁶ In 1981, the party had 1.524 official staff, of which a mere 25 were employed by the federal party headquarters while the rest worked for the parties of either the republics or the provinces, with their majority – 578 staff – hired by the Serbian Communist Party.⁷

In the system drifting toward a confederative structure, JNA continued to remain the sole federal institution.

WARTIME BEGINNINGS

Following the collapse and surrender of the Yugoslav Kingdom in April 1941, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije – KPJ) called for an armed uprising on 22 June. KPJ leaders not only sought political control but also held the top command of Partisan detachments.

Partisan detachments did not have sufficient striking power and mobility to conduct major military operations, therefore KPJ's leadership organised senior military units capable of carrying out tactical and combat manoeuvres against significant enemy forces without being restricted to a specific deployment area.⁸

The First Proletarian Assault Brigade (Prva proleterska udarna brigada) was created in Rudo, Bosnia on 21 December 1941. However, KPJ was reluctant to emphasise the communist nature of the Partisan movement.⁹ As a result, the units and formations of the so-called People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije – NOVJ) were not actually modelled on the First Proletarian Assault Brigade. The latter represented KPJ's armed force with a mission to fight class enemies among others, as also indicated by its special insignia, the red flag with the sickle and hammer.¹⁰

Nevertheless, it was vital for KPJ to secure and maintain influence at all levels. Whereas military commanders serving at the regional NOVJ headquarters were at the same time party leaders, military formations were subject to dual control through the institution of political commissioners. Additionally, party secretaries were appointed in secret to theoretically serve as deputies to the political commissioners yet in many cases, their identities were practically unknown to their nominal superiors.¹¹

KPJ had multiple goals in World War II. It engaged in combat against the Axis powers that occupied and divided the territory of the Yugoslav Kingdom, the military units of the collaborating local administration, and the fascist puppet state called the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna država Hrvatska – NDH). Its priorities also included the eradication of the ascending royalist and nationalist Serbian četnik movement whose core was formed by the surviving forces of the Royal Yugoslav Army. Parallel to the liberation movement and the civil war, a proletarian revolution was being fought in the eyes of KPJ. At stake was no less than the socio-political structure of post-war Yugoslavia.

⁶ Johnson, A. Ross: Political Leadership in Yugoslavia: Evolution of the League of Communists; The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica: R-3049/1; November 1983

⁷ Johnson, A. Ross: Impressions of Post-Tito Yugoslavia: A Trip Report; The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica: N-1813; January 1982

⁸ Béleczi Ferenc: Fegyverbarátunk a Jugoszláv Néphadsereg; Zrínyi Katonai Kiadó, Budapest, 1986

⁹ Miliivojević, Marko: The Yugoslav People's Army: The Military Dimension, Bradford Studies on Yugoslavia, Number 12, Postgraduate School of Yugoslav Studies, University of Bradford, 1988

¹⁰ Marijan, Davor: Slom Titove armije: Jugoslavenska narodna armija i raspad Jugoslavije 1987.-1992.; Golden marketing-Tehnička knjiga, Hrvatski institut za povijest; Zagreb, 2008

¹¹ Miliivojević, Marko: The Yugoslav People's Army: The Political Dimension, Bradford Studies on Yugoslavia, Number 13, Postgraduate School of Yugoslav Studies, University of Bradford, 1988

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Success was complete. Tito's movement emerged victorious from World War II on the side of the Allies. Relying virtually on its own military resources, it liberated the entire territory of Yugoslavia, won the civil war, and set the foundations for the new, communist system to be built.

INSTRUMENT OF RETALIATION

A forerunner of the political police was the People's Defence Subdivision (Odeljenje za zaštitu naroda – OZNa). Initially, it was designed to fight against the 'fifth column', and was later assigned intelligence duties.¹²

Policing forces were also needed in the Partisan-controlled territories to guard prisons as well as to carry out intelligence tasks. In August 1944, the units of the People's Defence Corps of Yugoslavia (Korpus narodne odbrane Jugoslavije – KNOJ) were formed. KNOJ was subordinated to the commander of OZNa, and served as an instrument to liquidate the enemies of the emerging system.

The consolidation of the newly established regime began with a series of retaliations. In Istria, a part of the Italian population was expelled or murdered. German ethnic groups in Vojvodina were interned, and later collectively deported. There were mass executions of Hungarians, based on the verdicts of local ad hoc committees made up of Communists and Partisans. In some settlements of the southern region of Bačka, internments and deportations took place. Partisans also persecuted Serbs fighting on the side of the četniks, as well as killed Croats and Slovenes seen as collaborators or being tied to NDH.¹³

The Directorate of State Security (Uprava državne bezbednosti – UDB) was established as a result of the reorganisation of OZNa in 1946. Thereafter, military security issues were dealt with by the Directorate of Counterintelligence (Uprava kontraobaveštajne službe – KOS).¹⁴ OZNa had been led by Aleksandar Ranković who continued to head UDB. He and his apparatus proved indispensable in the management of the first, deep, and open-ended crisis of the regime that was brought about by the split with the USSR.

SPLIT AND CLEANSING

Yugoslavia and the USSR maintained close ties during World War II and in the subsequent period. Yugoslav Communists adopted the Soviet model in organising the armed forces, hired military counsellors, and had a number of Yugoslav officers trained in the USSR. However, KPJ stressed that Yugoslavia had been liberated by the Partisans (only a small area of the country was affected by the passage of the Soviet troops).

This was supported by domestic policy reasons, since a major guiding principle of the Yugoslav Communists rested on the premise that the liberation of the country and the victory of the socialist revolution would empower Southern Slavic nations to fully enforce their interests and aspirations.

Moscow failed to understand, or rather underestimated, the importance to the Yugoslav Communists of maintaining independence without jeopardising ideological loyalty. They viewed themselves as an avant-garde force of revolution, with a tendency to show superiority in their relationships to other communist parties.¹⁵ At this time, the idiosyncratic Yugoslav attitude was already manifest, marked by an overestimation of the country's significance, political weight, and prestige in the international arena.¹⁶

¹² Nikolić, Kosta – Dimitrijević, Bojan B.: Formiranje OZN-e u Srbiji i Beogradu i likvidacije „narodnih neprijatelja” 1944; Istorija 20. veka, 2/2010; Beograd

¹³ Geiger, Vladimir: Tito i likvidacija hrvatskih zarobljenika u Blajburgu 1945; Istorija 20. veka; 2/2010, Beograd

¹⁴ After 1964, Directorate of Security: Uprava bezbednosti JNA.

¹⁵ Juhász József: Volt egyszer egy Jugoszlávia: A délszláv állam története; Aula, Budapest, 1999

¹⁶ Nobile, Mario: Hrvatski feniks: Diplomatski procesi iza zatvorenih vrata 1990.-1997.; Nakladni zavod Globus, Zagreb, 2000

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Soviet–Yugoslav relations turned sour in early 1948 when Belgrade opposed Stalin's intention to homogenise Eastern Bloc states. After the rejection of Soviet claims by the KPJ leadership in March 1948, Kominform expelled Yugoslav Communists from the membership in June.¹⁷

Tito was aided by a combination of two factors. On the one hand, he enjoyed significant support in his country and, on the other hand, no Soviet troops were stationed on Yugoslav territory. Nonetheless, the split was a momentous and crucial decision. In the following period, Belgrade sustained fears over an attack from the USSR and its allies. Armed clashes occurred along the Hungarian–Yugoslav border,¹⁸ and these incidents took a toll of several hundred lives.¹⁹

The Soviets successfully turned several military top commanders, including the wartime Chief of the General Staff of the Yugoslav People's Army, the Deputy Head of the Political Directorate in charge of political control of the army,²⁰ as well as the Head of the Agitprop Department of the Army. Military and civilian people perceived as enemies of the regime were transported to the camp operating at the site of a marble mine on an Adriatic island:²¹ Goli otok was the most public and infamous prison camp of the Yugoslav Gulag system.

Cleansing actions were executed by UDB. The armed forces had to be purged of pro-Soviet elements whilst maintaining the level of combat readiness. Ranković's loyalty was of paramount importance in this period highly crucial to the survival of the regime. He completed his mission successfully, as also demonstrated by his steady career ascent. He was widely considered as a potential successor to Tito who was already aging. UDB evolved into an infamous, efficient, and seemingly omnipotent institutional arm of the state.

Ranković's failure was caused by the very same powerful influence he had gained. Allegedly, Tito's Belgrade government was also tapped by UDB in addition to top party officials, thus Ranković was relieved from office on 1 July 1966. As a consequence of the incident, UDB was reorganised. Former chief of JNA's security service General Ivan Mišković, a key figure in the coup against Ranković, was appointed as the new head of the political police.²² The reorganised and renamed State Security Service (Služba državne bezbednosti – SDB) was decentralised, with the new structure allowing the federal SDB to only access the information transmitted by the security services of the republics. Mišković headed SDB from 1966 to 1973, serving as special advisor to the President for security affairs and Secretary of the Council of the Presidency of the Federation for State Security from 1971 as well.

He was succeeded by General Stjepan Domankušić, a top military commander and former head of KOS.²³ Throughout a long period, Yugoslavia's secret service apparatus was controlled by military cadres.

INCREASING POLITICAL WEIGHT

After World War II, 70.000 of the military personnel were member of the KPJ, and another 70.000 were activists of the youth organisation (Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije – SKOJ), seen as entry to party membership.²⁴

The regime guarded the armed forces from 'counterrevolutionary' and Western influences while the Communist Party continued to exercise control over the military. This was achieved via the Political Directorate operating in the Ministry of Defence (Glavna politička uprava – GPU). During the daily surveillance, all military issues were placed under scrutiny.

¹⁷ Juhász, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Jakus János: Konfliktushelyzet Magyarország és Jugoszlávia között a hidegháború kezdetén: a Magyar Néphadsereg állapota és háborús tervei Jugoszlávia ellen az 1950-es évek elején; in: „A déli végeken...”: Tanulmányok a Magyarország és Jugoszlávia között a bácskai térségben kialakult hidegháborús konfliktusról; szerk.: Maruzsa Zoltán; Eötvös József Főiskolai Kiadó; Baja, 2009

¹⁹ Ritter László: Titkos háború Magyarország és Jugoszlávia között – Jugoszláv és magyar hírszerzés: 1948-1953; *História*, 2010/1-2

²⁰ Miliivojević: *The Yugoslav People's Army: The Military Dimension*, *ibid.*

²¹ Dimitrijević, Bojan B.: *Jugoslovenska armija: nova ideologija, vojnici i oružje*; Institut za savremenu istoriju; Beograd, 2006

²² Miliivojević: *The Yugoslav People's Army: The Political Dimension*, *ibid.*

²³ Miliivojević: *The Yugoslav People's Army: The Political Dimension*, *ibid.*

²⁴ Marijan: *Slom Titove armije*, *ibid.*

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The party organisation was expected to take a position on any arising problem and also get involved in finding a solution thereto.²⁵ In this particular era, the political apparatus had greater influence over the military than the army leadership.²⁶

The party organisation only had these authorities before 1949. Thenceforth, it was gradually excluded from daily operational control, and assigned the duty to strengthen the morale and maintain ideological purity. The institution of dual control and political commissioners was abolished in 1953, to be replaced by the so-called moral and political education bodies whereas politically competent deputies were delegated to the military commanders (of all units from company to army district level).

However, ties between the party and the army remained close. At the leadership and top command levels, the system of party committees was eliminated, whereas a new structure of elective boards was set up. The purpose was to ensure wide military representation in the party across all levels ranging from private soldiers to chief commanders.²⁷ The Communist Party was deeply concerned that, from the army of the revolution and the people, a new, closed military class had emerged which was isolated from the rest of the society and barely expressed an opinion on social and economic policies.²⁸ The party now had a double interest. Firstly, it aimed to integrate the professional military personnel in the developing social structures and, secondly, to ensure adequate control and command of the armed forces.

The autonomous party organisation in the Yugoslav People's Army (Organizacija Saveza komunista u JNA – OSK JNA) was established in 1969, with the party exerting influence through the political directorate operating as the General Staff Directorate (Generalštab – GŠ). Basic party units were formed at the level of the battalions and the institutions of equivalent rank. The highest political forum was the Conference of SKJ JNA.²⁹

The political weight of the armed forces was steadily increasing. At the 9th SKJ Congress in 1969, 45 members of the 52-member Presidium were elected, of which three were generals.³⁰ At the 10th Congress in 1974, already 21 senior officers and generals were voted into the Central Committee (Centralni komitet Saveza komunista Jugoslavije – CK SKJ) and other boards of SKJ.³¹ At this point, military personnel made up 10 per cent of CK SKJ membership. Four years later, at the 11th Congress in 1978, their share continued to rise to 14 per cent after the election of officials.³²

Tito announced in his speech on the 30th anniversary of the formation of the army in December 1971³³ that JNA's primary duty is to guarantee the security of the country, however, it shall also protect the achievements of the revolution from the inner enemy. After this communication generally interpreted as directive, JNA enjoyed an increasingly high degree of autonomy.

OSK JNA became a full member of the party league as the ninth party of the Yugoslav Communists operative in the military. The army was entitled to delegate as many representatives to the party bodies as an autonomous province. In common practice, a certain number of civilian party leaders from the Central Committee and the party organs of the republics were also delegated to the OSK JNA leadership. However, the Secretary of OSK JNA was appointed by the Presidium of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (Predsedništvo CK SKJ). This also demonstrated the distinguished political role of the military as the sole federal institution.

The post of the secretary of the army's party committee proved an important springboard, since it indicated the prospect of influential military or political positions for the office-holder. As an example, Nikola Ljubičić became Secretary

²⁵ Marijan: Slom Titove armije, *ibid.*

²⁶ Miliwojević: The Yugoslav People's Army: The Political Dimension, *ibid.*

²⁷ A Jugoszláv Kommunista Szövetség története, 1985

²⁸ Johnson, A. Ross: The Role of the Military in Communist Yugoslavia: An Historical Sketch; The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica: P-6070; January 1978

²⁹ Marijan: Slom Titove armije, *ibid.*

³⁰ RFE: Yugoslav Party Congress Round Up: Part One: Presidium & Executive Bureau, 17.03.1969

³¹ RFE: Yugoslav Party Congress and the Army, 13.06.1973

³² RFE: Tito Appoints Top Army Man As State Presidency's Secretary-general, 13.06.1979

³³ RFE: National Structure of the Yugoslav Army Leadership, 12.04.1972

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of the OSK JNA in 1965 and Minister of Defence from 1967 through to 1982, simultaneously representing the army in the 24-member Yugoslav Party Presidium.³⁴ He proceeded to serve as Chairman of the Serbian Presidency until 1984 and Serbia's delegate to the collective Federal Presidency of Yugoslavia. His successor, Admiral Branko Mamula had a similar arch of political career. He was assigned as political commissioner to a battalion and then to a brigade during World War II. In the post-war period, he was promoted to political commissioner and then Commander of the Fleet and the Naval District. In 1978, one year before his appointment to Chief of the General Staff of the Yugoslav People's Army, he became member of CK SKJ. He pursued both a political and military career. He was elected to the Central Committee in 1982 and 1986, proceeded to Chief of the General Staff of the Yugoslav People's Army between 1979 and 1982, and held the post of Minister of Defence from 1982 to 1988.³⁵

The so-called moral and political fitness was an essential prerequisite for career advancement. With almost no exceptions, the professional military personnel were Communist Party members. In 1978, for instance, the number of party members ranged between 97.000 and 105.000 in the army, making up 6-6.5 per cent of all Yugoslav Communists,³⁶ whereas in 1981, OSK JNA's 110.000 members accounted for 5.2 per cent of the total Yugoslav party membership.³⁷ In the mid 1980-s, the military representation in SKJ included 98.9 per cent of commissioned officers, 94.1 per cent of non-commissioned officers, 52 per cent of the civilian military personnel, and 10.11 per cent of enlisted men.³⁸

SUMMARY

It can be concluded from the review of the relationship between the Yugoslav Army and the Communist Party that the two institutions were never true rivals.³⁹ Due to the intertwining of the party and the military, as well as to the crucial role of the army, JNA de facto functioned as the armed wing of SKJ as well.⁴⁰

The close ties had been maintained up to the disintegration of the party in January 1990. After the interruption of the 14th and last SKJ Congress, JNA attempted to preserve ideological continuity and reorganise the Communist Party. However, this initiative met with failure and eventually died away. Without the backup of the Communist Party, JNA lost both its ideological support base and foundation of identity.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, League of Communists of Yugoslavia, SKJ, civil-military relations

Kulcsszavak: Jugoszlávia, Jugoszláv Néphadsereg, JNA, Jugoszláv Kommunista Szövetség, SKJ, civil-katonai kapcsolatok

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³⁴ RFE: General Ljubicic to Represent Army in the Yugoslav Party Presidium, 23.05.1978

³⁵ RFE: Yugoslav Army's New Leaders; 24.05.1982

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³⁸ Marijan: Slom Titove armije, ibid.

³⁹ Gow, James: Legitimacy and the Military: The Yugoslav Crisis; St. Martin's Press, New York, 1992

⁴⁰ Marijan: Slom Titove armije, ibid.

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