

## Was nationalism the primary cause of the wars in the former Yugoslavia?

Written by Harry Booty

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# Was nationalism the primary cause of the wars in the former Yugoslavia?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/02/28/was-nationalism-the-primary-cause-of-the-wars-in-the-former-yugoslavia/>

HARRY BOOTY, FEB 28 2011

The wars in the former state of Yugoslavia that endured for most of the 1990's have an established legacy today. They have come to be seen by those in the West as a gritty, difficult and unpleasant series of conflicts, epitomised by horrific brutality perpetrated by ultra-nationalist thugs. Whilst this is in many ways true, this has led to a subsequent perception that these wars were fought purely over these nationalist ideals, with the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia simply falling in on itself, dividing up along ethnic fault lines and resulting in the infamous rabid atrocities of Srebrenica and the like. However, the extent to which this is entirely valid is debatable, as there are several factors alongside the role of nationalism that we should study to understand the why these bloody conflicts occurred.

Firstly however, we should establish what nationalism means in an academic context. Our modern understanding of theoretical nationalism comes from the French Revolution, where the concept of the nation was expressed as 'above all of a shared, common and equal citizenship and the unity of the people'[1]. This was linked with the German concept of 'the *Volk*' - a people with a shared 'history, tradition and culture'[2]. Another area of critical importance in this area is the inherent xenophobia that is central to many nationalist ideologies - where a mix of fear and preconceptions of superiority act as an 'obstacle to cooperation'[3] with other national groups - and in some cases provoke conflict. With this in mind then, we can go on to tackle the role that nationalism played in the instigation of the Yugoslav wars.

The role of nationalism should not of course be underestimated when studying these wars. This area can be subdivided into two areas, the first of which is best described as ethnic nationalism. This meant that ethnic groups within the Federal Yugoslav state felt that they were genetically superior to the other ethnic groups in the respective republics, and therefore went to war to secede. This division was seen as primordial - that these groups had historically been mutually antagonistic. There is certainly evidence for this. The Battle of Kosovo Field - which took place in 1389 - was frequently used to 'rouse people's emotions'[4] in the 1990's, despite over six hundred years separating the two events. This problem was compounded by the fact that 'no ethnic group was wholly contained within any republic'[5], meaning that there were regular conflicts over claims to one another's territory due to the presence of co-ethnics in the region. Thus we can see that ethnic disagreements did play at least some role in the fomentation of hostility in the run-up to the Yugoslav wars, as they created an identity to rally to for each group, as well as a tangible enemy to fear and demand action against.

However the extent to which this actually caused the wars has been significantly challenged in recent years. It has been argued that the 'murderous core of the wars were not hordes of ordinary citizens ripped loose from their repression and incited to violence against their neighbours'[6]. Instead it has been suggested that observers saw nationalism to be a major cause of the war due to the primordial nature of it. In other words, since this area had been 'one of the most active and historic fault lines in Europe'[7], this new round of conflicts was marked as simply another one. In actual fact, it has been argued, 'there is much evidence that the masses, especially in ethnically mixed regions, did not want war'[8] and that war came about as a result of other factors (to be discussed below). Therefore this argument limits the extent to which nationalism caused the wars as it shows that it was not a major operative issue for much of the population at this time.

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Another area where nationalism could be considered to have caused the conflicts can be described as the nationalism of individuals. This centres on the role of Slobodan Milosevic. His personal policies have been described as 'both populist and nationalist'[9] as he sought to fight for his own Serbian ethnicity at the expense of others. The means he used are largely irrelevant, as his desire to form a 'state in which one national group was dominant' [10] clearly shows how nationalism shaped his policies – policies which were in the end a central cause of the wars, and substantiates the argument that nationalism was a major cause of the wars.

However this argument has also been challenged since the end of the wars, who describe the actions of major regional politicians such as Milosevic as mere opportunism. It has been argued instead that Milosevic used a 'strategy of provoking conflict along ethnic lines'[11] to further his own political career and to distract the populace from his 'disastrous economic policies'[12] that may have solidified opposition to him. Milosevic consciously wanted war, and noticing the 'power of nationalist sentiment'[13] he subsequently 'stockpiled heavy weaponry...in anticipation of a showdown'[14]. Milosevic was in many ways a warmonger, and manipulated nationalism for his own ends, which therefore decreases the extent to which nationalism can be seen as a singular cause of war as it was utilised as a means (rather than an ends) to further the opportunistic gains of a single elitist politician.

There are also other factors completely separate from nationalism that should be analysed independently to gain a full picture on why the Balkan wars occurred. These factors can be divided into underlying causes and direct causes. A significant underlying cause was the death of Tito in 1980, the authoritarian charismatic leader of the Yugoslav state. The loss of this man, who had led the country since the end of World War Two clearly 'deprived the country...of a unifying symbol'[15] that had in many ways been crucial to the unity of such a fragmented state. Without a titular head dominating the politics of this country, 'debate over reform...broke out into the open'[16]. This debate over how Yugoslavia should develop quickly led to political conflict, and paved the way for the disintegration of the unity of the Yugoslav state. Therefore, whilst the death of Tito cannot in any way be considered a direct cause of the wars, the lack of his all-encompassing leadership meant that the growing divisions amongst politicians in the Yugoslav region ran unchecked during the 1980's, and were allowed to develop into open conflict in the 1990's as these differences became intractable to those on each side.

Another underlying factor was the gradual fall of the USSR in the years between 1989 and 1992. This may seem somewhat irrelevant, as Yugoslavia had been allowed its right to 'self determination' as a nominally independent state from the USSR since the Second World War[17]. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the bipolar system of the Cold War, as the USSR would no longer apply the Brezhnev doctrine to interfere militarily in states which fell within its sphere of influence – for example as it had during the 1980's in Afghanistan. This meant the Russians 'whenever possible avoided involvement'[18] and carried out no major effort to prevent the war or limit it within its own influence, as it may have done in the previous decades. It is perhaps difficult to predict what may have happened had the newly meek Russia remained the aggressively reactive USSR that it once was. However, it is nevertheless a factor that should be acknowledged here as a contributor to Yugoslavia's decline into the morass of civil war in the 1990's.

If we move on to the more direct causes of the Balkans conflict, we can see that one of these was the failing financial system of the Yugoslav state in the early 1990's. The Yugoslav economy was essentially, in turmoil. In the bickering and strife that followed the death of Tito 'the economic condition worsened'[19] and the already poor Yugoslav country became even more so. This had negative social and political implications too – as is oft the case, when 'economic production and strength decline' then 'intense frustration and the rise in proclivity to violence results'[20]. As a consequence of this it is easy to understand how the dire economic situation in Yugoslavia acted as a causal factor for the wars as the tension, anger, fear and frustration engendered by this situation was at least as powerful a motive as nationalism in causing conflict and resentment among the peoples of the Yugoslav state.

This problem was compounded by the second direct factor – the economic and political response of the international community (i.e. the West) when faced by the problems in Yugoslavia. As a result of the earlier discussed economic problems, 'foreign debt had risen above \$22 billion'[21]. This meant pressure was placed upon the state to adhere to Western values – i.e. to capitalise their economy – or face paying back a debt they could not afford. When we add to this the divided political response to the initial secessions in the early 1990's we can see how the problem developed

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internationally. There were essentially two camps of international thought on how the West should respond to the problems, with 'Germany advocating full recognition' on one side whilst on the other 'the US and UK argued for a comprehensive political solution to be agreed on at the Yugoslav conference'[22]. This separation in international opinion meant no universally accepted (and therefore no legal) response could be agreed upon in the early days of the conflict. This meant that whilst the West cannot in any way be blamed for actually causing the Yugoslav wars, the fact that there was no possibility of a Western intervention to stop the conflict as it arose – as may have been the case had there been universal agreement – meant that the wars went ahead.

So, to what extent was nationalism a cause of wars in the former Yugoslavia? The answer is less clear-cut than it may seem. Nationalism was a major feature of the wars as they were prosecuted but as it is succinctly put here, 'while it (the war) may be about ethnic issues, it may be caused by issues not related to ethnicity'[23]. Nationalism was often touted as the justification for some of the more vicious practices of the war, but if we get under the surface of these preconceptions we can see other, much less contentious reasons for the outbreak of conflict – the opportunism of individuals, the removal of regional power, a failing economy etc. – that collectively detract from the validity of seeing nationalism as the primary factor in the Yugoslav wars. Whilst it cannot of course be ignored – due to the brutal violence persecuted in its name – the concept of nationalism when applied to the Balkans Conflict should be seen more as a means to motivate the people by the political elites of the time, rather than an ends to which those political elites used their forces to fight for.

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[12] Ibid.

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**Written by:** Harry Booty  
**Written at:** Kings College London  
**Written for:** Dr. Ruth Deyermond  
**Date written:** February 2010

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### About the author:

Harry Booty is currently a Commissioning Editor for e-IR. He is currently studying a BA War Studies degree at King's College London.