

# Were 'Ancient Hatreds' the Primary Cause of the Yugoslavian Civil War ?

Written by Gareth Jonas

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Were 'Ancient Hatreds' the Primary Cause of the Yugoslavian Civil War ?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/05/22/were-ancient-hatreds-the-primary-cause-of-the-yugoslavian-civil-war/>

GARETH JONAS, MAY 22 2019

The causes of the Yugoslavian Civil War, a succession of ongoing conflicts within the former Socialist federal republic between 1991-1999, is a much-debated subject within contemporary academia (Cederman *et al.*, 2009, 99). In his text 'Balkan Ghosts', journalist Robert Kaplan attributes its origins to 'ancient hatreds', the central tenet of Primordialism which hypothesises that conflict is the inevitable result of perennial, irreconcilable hostile feelings existing between ethnic groups in a heterogeneous society (1993, 7). It significantly influenced academic debate concerning the conflict, evoking criticism from scholars of the Neorealist and Constructivist schools who argue that the inherent flaws within Primordialism's theoretical premise mean that Kaplan fails to properly account for the conflict's origins. This essay will critically assess Kaplan's thesis- and that of Primordialism in general- to account for the wars' primary causes through its evaluation against the competing theories of Neorealism and Constructivism. This is achieved through discussion of the central principles underlying each approach as outlined in the theories of Posen, Fearon and Laitin; followed by a comparative analysis of the applicability of each theory through examination of key events throughout the Yugoslavian wars. For the sake of theoretical clarity this essay will proceed on the basis of interpretive charity, considering only the most prominent literature within each of the theoretical schools. Kaplan's thesis on the wars' origins in 'ancient hatreds' is severely limited by the cultural determinism and racist essentialism inherent within Primordialist theory, with the result that he fails to determine the primary causes of the Yugoslav Civil War. In examining the unique nature of the Yugoslav war it is apparent that none of the theories properly account for its origins (Harmon, 2007, 13). The application of Neorealist and Constructivist approaches shows that although both theories provide an analysis of the 'necessary conditions' in which the Yugoslav conflict occurred, neither explain the primary causes. Rather, a multidisciplinary approach is necessitated, summarised in Paul Roe's thesis that the origins of the Yugoslavian conflict was the result of each group's concern for their societal identity, a result of elite exploitation of structural anarchy for political gain.

Kaplan posits that the origins of the Yugoslavian Civil War are found in the existence of 'ethnic ancient hatreds' between the warring groups based on ethnic identity (1993, 3). He attributes the various conflicts of the civil war to cultural incompatibilities between ethnic groups based on religion; the legacy of a struggle dating back to the ancient schisms between Roman-Catholicism and Greek-Orthodoxy (1993, 7). In doing so, Kaplan traces the latest manifestation of these 'ancient hatreds' back to the genocidal actions of the Croatian Ushtasha in World War Two against Orthodox Serbian minorities in Croatia on the pretext of forced evangelisation (Ibid, 16). This theoretical premise belongs to Cultural Primordialism- the socio-philosophical theory which specifies that ethnic identity is fixed, innate and intransigent; the result of societal, religious and discursive ties which bind communities together (Geertz, 1973, 259-260). Primordialists assert that ethnicity is an objective identity- the result of cultural beliefs and traditions natural to one's ethnicity- which are singular and fixed with distinct social boundaries (Bayar, 2009, 1642). The existence of such an ineffable bond between individuals defines them against other groups, with the result that they behave in a unitary manner during times of crisis (Ibid, 1659; Williams, 2015, 147). Applying this concept to the study of ethnic conflict Primordialism perceives its origins in the supposedly irreconcilable differences between such groups, generating feelings of hostility and a fear of domination which move groups to attack one another. Accordingly, the causes of ethnic conflict are natural and recurring, the inevitable outcome of cultural incompatibilities between ethnic groups which recur throughout history in heterogeneous societies. Thus, Kaplan's central thesis is that the origins of the Yugoslav Civil Wars' conflict lay in ingrained religious differences between the Serbs and

## Were 'Ancient Hatreds' the Primary Cause of the Yugoslavian Civil War ?

Written by Gareth Jonas

Croats; he extends this premise to the preceding wars in Bosnia and Kosovo.

In his adoption of Primordialism's thesis to explain the primary causes of the Yugoslav conflict Kaplan receives criticism across academia concerning his reliance on reductionist accounts of history and stereotypical perceptions of culture in the Balkans (Kushi, 2016). A central criticism of Primordialism by Constructivists is the premise that ethnic identity is a natural, archaic variable rather than the discursively-constructed, malleable concept that Constructivists perceive it to be (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 849). Primordialism's consideration of culture as an objective category- rather than a subjective product of social, cultural and political interaction- generates accusations of racist essentialism and cultural determinism by Constructivists. This criticism is true of Kaplan's work, his assertion that the Serb-Croat conflict was the inevitable result of inherent cultural disparities 'which perfectly mirror[ed] the process of history' (1993, 8) is predicated on subjective cultural stereotypes with no historical or scientific foundation. As Fearon and Laitin observe, Primordialism is often utilised by journalists seeking to infuse a 'romantic dimension' into the study of ethnicity (2000, 849; Stack, 1983, 2; Kushi, 2014). Founded on Balkanist assumptions regarding Serb and Croat culture; the reductionist nature of Kaplan's methodology significantly undermines the utility and subsequent validity of his thesis. This reductionism is also apparent in Kaplan's limited usage of case-studies. Kaplan bases his argument on an analysis of the Serb-Croat conflict- extending the premise to the Bosnian war without considering the differing nature of violence committed therein. Like his conception of ethnic identity, Kaplan reduces the events in Yugoslavia to a singular conflict amid the succession that composed the war- in doing so he fails to discern the differing variables that contributed to the origins of each conflict in his focus on cultural disparities.

The limited utility of both Primordialism's argument is further demonstrated in both Constructivism's and Neorealism's observation that Primordialism cannot account for the relatively harmonious variance in intergroup relations and power-sharing within states throughout history (Posen, 1993, 27; Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 849). If the theory was correct, the consociation of power in ethnically-heterogeneous societies would be impossible and ethnic-conflict would be a constant phenomenon. Kaplan's thesis is also susceptible to this challenge. Between the Yugoslavian state's inception in 1945 to its collapse in 1990 heterogeneous ethnic-groups coexisted without conflict despite- as Kaplan observes- apparent differences in religion and culture. Despite the hostile political rhetoric of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia in the run-up to the conflict, ethnic-groups continued to attempt power-sharing agreements. This phenomenon continued into the conflict, demonstrated in the 1991 Karadjordjevo Agreement between Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic and Francis Tudjman signifying the division of Bosnia and a power-sharing agreement between Croatia and Serbia (World Heritage Encyclopaedia, 2016).

In its rejection of the Primordialist thesis Realist theory seeks to provide an alternative account of the primary causes of ethnic conflict- transposing macrocosmic, structural explanation of state-warfare onto the microcosmic inter-state level. Unlike Primordialism and Constructivism, Realist theory perceives ethnicity as neither inherent within human nature nor intrinsically valuable as an explanation for the origins of ethnic conflict. Rather, it adopts an instrumentalist approach in its perception of ethnicity as an organisational tool used as a strategic basis for coalitions competing for stability (Posen, 1993, 28). Accordingly, Realist literature concerning the origins of the war perceive it as a tragic result of security-seeking groups misperceiving each other's intent rather than a conflict resulting from hostility based on antagonistic ethnic identity (Ibid, 1993, 30). This is exemplified in Posen's 'Ethnic Security Dilemma' in which he applies the Neorealist Security Dilemma within the paradigms of intra-state conflict to explain the origins of what he perceives as a civil- rather than ethnic- war in Yugoslavia (1993, 27). Posen posits that the absence of a hegemonic sovereign following Tito's death in 1980 created a condition of 'emerging anarchy' in which competing groups-organised via ethnicity-were forced into a condition of self-help (Ibid, 27-28). In this context, newly independent groups sought to ascertain their competitors' intentions through examination of each other's military capabilities. Posen asserts that the failure of each group to distinguish between others' offensive and defensive capabilities subsequently generates reference to the 'historical record' (Posen, 1991, 31). Concurring with Kaplan's thesis regarding the Ushtasha, Posen subsequently deviates from Primordialism in his assertion that each group's knowledge was based on outdated information and thus misperceptions of malign intent, causing an escalation of tensions and the outbreak of war (Ibid, 1991, 31-34). These misperceptions were an endemic feature of the Yugoslav conflict, with Posen citing the 1989 'Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution's' reduction of Kosovo's autonomy by Milosevic as another occasion in which misperception- on the behalf of the Albanian Kosovans- resulted in civil war (Ibid, 1993,

## Were 'Ancient Hatreds' the Primary Cause of the Yugoslavian Civil War ?

Written by Gareth Jonas

35).

In his attempt to extend Neorealism's theoretical franchise Posen adds extra conditions to the Ethnic Security Dilemma- the 'superiority of offensive over defensive action' and 'windows of opportunity'. Applying Neorealism's assertion that hostile neighbours recognise the advantages of offensive action against one another in a condition of anarchy, Posen asserts that the existence of 'ethnic islands'- minority groups living within each of Yugoslavia's republics- motivated ethnic-groups to wage preventive war to protect these minority groups (1993, 31-34). The condition is exacerbated by the existence of 'windows of opportunity'- the application of a cost-benefit calculus in groups perceptions of others' relative power- which incentivises stronger groups to initiate pre-emptive violence to consolidate their dominant position. These concepts recognisably manifest themselves in the Yugoslavian Civil War through the aggressive actions of the Serbs towards the Bosnians and Slovenes in the commencement of the 1991 'Ten-Day War' and 1992 Bosnian War. The extra conditions of his thesis are displayed in the existence of large Serbian communities in Bosnia and Slovenia: thirty-one (Hercegbosna, 2016) and twenty-five percent (Popos, 1991) respectively and dominant military strength of the YNA.

Posen's Neorealist explanation of the origins of ethnic conflict extends its theoretical franchise beyond its previous interstate paradigm. His identification of additional conditions as exacerbating factors are indeed present in the Yugoslav conflict and lend credibility to Neorealism's explanation. Problems manifest, however, in the application of Posen's theory to the specific origins of the Yugoslav conflict. These are made apparent in the Constructivist critiques regarding his lack of proper theoretical engagement with the specific-context of the Yugoslav conflict and failure to discern the 'tragedy' element necessary the Security Dilemma's application.

A relevant criticism identified by Constructivists is that Posen's 'Ethnic Security Dilemma' merely appropriates Neorealism's structural focus on interstate violence and transposes it onto the intrastate level without properly engaging with the specific context of the Yugoslavian Civil War (Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996, 112-113). Posen's appropriation of Neorealist theory ensures that his Security Dilemma is solely predicated on military dynamics- arguably changing few of the concepts fundamental content. Whilst the referent object changes from state to society and, correspondingly, the threat switches from sovereignty to identity Posen's thesis continues to focus on the Neorealist assumption that ethnic-groups will behave in an identical manner to states- forcing interstate theories to conform with intra-state logic. This reliance ensures that Posen's theory degenerates into 'Hobbesian Pessimism' without proper consideration of more peaceful outcomes such as Karl Deutsch's 'pluralistic security community' (Ibid, 1996, 114). His reliance on worst-case scenarios ignores the specific context of the Yugoslavian war and how prior to the conflict the heterogeneous Republic's lived in peaceful coexistence from the state's inception until 1991- making him susceptible to the accusation of 'theoretical appropriation' and 'inclusionary control' in his limited attempt to reinvigorate the Realist discipline.

Regardless of the theoretical appropriation inherent within Posen's theory it is obvious that his concept of 'emerging anarchy' improves on Kaplan's deficits in its specification of the scenario in which consociation may have become impossible. As well as this, the additional exacerbating conditions he hypothesises are also applicable in the case of Yugoslavia. However, the applicability of Neorealism's security dilemma to the conflict is disputable. Posen attempts to widen the concept through his three conditions concerning ambiguous armaments as well as actor's recognition of the superiority of offensive action in moments of opportunity. However, in doing so he never specifies whether the Serb-Croat perceptions of malign intent were based on misperception or real malignity (Roe, 2000, 382; 2005, 38). This has significant repercussions for Posen's application of the Security Dilemma, predicated as it is on the traditional Butterfieldian conception of tragedy. It is subsequently impossible to apply the Neorealist Security Dilemma without first identifying the element of tragedy, invalidating Posen's thesis (Ibid, 2002, 61). Whilst the 'necessary conditions' Posen provides within his thesis help explain the exacerbating factors behind certain stages of the Yugoslav war he ultimately fails to account for its primary causes, rendering the case of the 'Ethnic Security Dilemma' inapplicable.

The central contention between Constructivism, Neorealism and Primordialism is the way in which they instrumentalise identity in their theories. Constructivists argue that both theories perception of ethnicity as either an organisational tool or basis for 'ancient hatreds' oversimplifies the complicated nature of ethnic identity and the role it

## Were 'Ancient Hatreds' the Primary Cause of the Yugoslavian Civil War ?

Written by Gareth Jonas

played in the causes of conflict (Roe, 2005, 38; Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996, 115-116; Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 847). The concept of identity is paramount to Constructivist explanations of the primary causes of the Yugoslavian Civil War; they hypothesise that it is an evolving, malleable concept- the product of human action and discourse rather than biology (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 846). Accordingly, Constructivist explanations of the Yugoslavian Wars origins assert that conflicts origins lay in groups fears regarding their ethnic identity. This is embodied in the Copenhagen School's concept of Societal Security- the idea that security is based on identity and, correspondingly, anything that encroaches on an individual's identity constitutes a threat to their security (Buzan cited in Roe, 2002, 65).

Fearon and Laitin observe that the prevailing argument in Constructivist literature is that large-scale ethnic violence is provoked by elites manipulating groups social histories, myths and collective narratives to gain, maintain, or increase their hold on political power (Tambiah and Kapferer cited in Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 853). The subsequent violence emerging from these discourses helps further antagonistic discourses and reproduce them, leading a constructed history of violence and animosity. In this context, the Yugoslavian Civil War was not the result of 'ancient hatreds' but rather the outcome of hostile discourses cultivated between differing Balkan groups by political elites acting as agents of construction. Sewell concurs, adding that elites' discourse was produced, reproduced and confirmed in the actions of individual members whose actions in turn shaped the intersubjective perceptions and subsequent responses of other ethnic groups (Sewell cited in Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 856). It is indisputable that elite manipulation of identity played a significant role in the conflict inception, demonstrated in Milosevic's 1989 Gazimestan speech. Furthermore, the perpetration of extreme violence based on antagonistic group identities is demonstrable in the Serbian siege of Sarajevo and 1995 massacre at Srebrenica. Similar consideration must be given to the role of gender identity. The 'rape camps' established at Omarska and Trnopolje by Serbian paramilitaries demonstrate the significance of identity as motive for- and weapon of- the conflicts. This poses a significant challenge to Posen's thesis, indicating that the violent actions committed throughout the wars were more than just an attempt at consolidating security but rather driven by hostile perceptions of differing ethnic groups. However, whilst the strength of Constructivist literature on elite-driven explanations challenges the prescriptive account of Posen, it similarly fails to properly account for the origins of the Yugoslav conflict. In their assertion that elite-led violence was the cause of the conflict Tambiah and Kapferer do not explain how elites can manipulate group narratives and convince followers to adopt antagonistic identities which had not existed prior to the conflict. Thus, contemporary literature does little to specify the conditions in which elite actions are able to construct the ethnic group in a more aggressive manner (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 854). Without the necessary conditions specified in Posen's theory concerning structural anarchy Constructivist's theory of identity is susceptible to a similar critique it levels against Kaplan- the failure to specify why ethnic groups adopt elite-constructed antagonistic identities in otherwise peaceful heterogeneous societies. This challenge is valid when applied to the case of Yugoslavia, whilst the rhetoric of Milosevic and Croatian leader Francis Tudjman is indicative of elite-led manipulation it does not justify why ethnic groups were so ready to adopt hostile stances. The violence in Yugoslavia was undoubtedly exacerbated by political leaders operationalising ethnic identity. It was not caused by it however, with the conflict's origins lying instead in Roe's concept of a 'Societal Security Dilemma'.

In his attempt to ameliorate the theoretical deficits of both Constructivist and Neorealist Scholars Roe combines the Copenhagen School's notion of Societal Security with Neorealism's Security Dilemma to illuminate the central role of identity in the perpetration of ethnic violence. Roe assumes the traditional Butterfieldian conception of the Security Dilemma- the premise that misperception and ambiguity over intent between groups in a condition of anarchy generates instability and conflict. He develops Posen's premise in his focus on security in terms of identity, splitting the Security Dilemma into three theoretical strands to argue that the Yugoslavian Civil War's origins lay in an 'illusory incompatibility' and 'required insecurity' between the differing ethnic groups (Roe, 2002, 58). This refers to a scenario in which each group defines their identity (and thus security) relative to others as well as defending their ethnic identity from the perceived imposition of others. Tito's death in 1980 and the collapse of the 1968 Brotherhood and Unity Laws signified the breakdown of central authority and an increasing illusory incompatibility as the varying ethnic groups mobilised themselves into societies with collective group narratives, history and myths defined in relation to each other. Accordingly, elite figures such as Milosevic and Tudjman developed a 'required insecurity' in their construction of antagonistic identities; exploiting the anarchy caused in the absence of central government to define groups against each other for political gain. Defined by these now hostile perceptions, Serbia acted as an aggressive force in the conflicts, exploiting its dominant military position to consolidate its societal security through

# Were 'Ancient Hatreds' the Primary Cause of the Yugoslavian Civil War ?

Written by Gareth Jonas

preventive wars of aggression aimed at protecting Serbian minority groups. The actions of Serbia against the secessionist proclamations of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo can be understood as attempts to defend their societal identity, with the origins traceable to a security dilemma in which ethnic identity played a central role. This is exemplified in Serbian General Kadjivec's 1989 statement that 'the disappearance of Yugoslavia as a common state ... is a most serious threat to the interests of the Serbian nation' (Glenny, 2000, 637). By maintaining Constructivism's focus on identity security and elite-manipulation Roe specifies the 'tragic' scenario in which ethnic identity was instrumentalised as well as developing the necessary conditions put forward by Posen to consider the crucial role of identity in causing the conflict.

In conclusion, Kaplan's theory of 'ancient hatreds' fails to determine the primary causes of the Yugoslavian Civil War. This essay has explored the central claim of his article, concluding that Kaplan's use of Primordialist theory to explain the conflicts origins is reliant on subjective perceptions of ethnicity and reductionist accounts of history which are not substantiated in empirical or anthropological studies, rendering his explanation inapplicable. This essay has also discussed the competing theories of Constructivism and Neorealism. The utility of Neorealist theory is its ability to put forth a set of necessary conditions for conflict to occur. In the context of the Yugoslav conflict Posen's conception of 'emerging anarchy', the existence of ethnic islands and the superior military power of the Serbian forces played a significant role in incentivising conflict between ethnic groups. However, Posen's failure to demonstrate the central tenet of his thesis- that of 'tragic' misperception- make it inapplicable to the case of Yugoslavia. Constructivism's conception of identity rectifies Posen's deficit but is itself problematic in its failure to explain how animus group-identities gain traction in ethnically-heterogeneous societies. The combination of both theories-summarised in Roe's explanation- indicates that the primary causes of the Yugoslavian Civil War lay in competing groups need for societal security- a result of intersubjective perceptions cultivated by power-hungry elites exploiting structural anarchy.

## Bibliography

- World Heritage Encyclopaedia (2016) *Karadjordevo Meeting*. Available at: [http://www.gutenberg.us/articles/karadjordjevo\\_meeting](http://www.gutenberg.us/articles/karadjordjevo_meeting) (Accessed: 14 November 2016).
- Bayar, M. (2009) 'Reconsidering Primordialism: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Ethnicity', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 32:9, pp. 1639–1657.
- Cederman, L.E., Wimmer, A. and Min, B. (2009) 'Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis', *World Politics*, 62:1, pp. 87–119.
- Fearon, J.D. and Laitin, D.D. (2000) 'Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity', *International Organization*, 54:4, pp. 845–877.
- Geertz, C. (1973) 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States', in Geertz, C. (ed.) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York, pp. 255–311.
- Glenny, M. (2000) *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York.
- Harmon, G. (2007) *War in the Former Yugoslavia: Ethnic Conflict or Power Politics?* Boston.
- Hercegbosna (2016) *HercegBosna- adjusted census of 1991*.
- Available at: <http://www.hercegbosna.org/kolumne/demografija/ekskluzivno-na-hercegbosnaorg-korigirani-popis-stanovnistva-iz-1991-godine-887.html> (Accessed: 24 November 2016).
- Kaplan, R.D. (2007) *Balkan ghosts: A Journey Through History*. New York.
- Kushi, S. (2014) 'Ancient Discontent Between Serbs and Albanians: Why Real and Imagined Stories Matter Today', *TransConflict*. pp. 1–12. Available at: <http://www.transconflict.com/2014/12/ancient-discontent-between-serbs-and->

## Were 'Ancient Hatreds' the Primary Cause of the Yugoslavian Civil War ?

Written by Gareth Jonas

albanians-why-real-and-imagined-stories-matter-today-112/ (Accessed: 30 October 2016)

Kushi, S. (2016) '*Ancient Hatreds Made Me Do It*'. Available at: <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1879-ancient-hatreds-made-me-do-it> (Accessed: 30 October 2016).

Lapid, Y. and Kratochwil, F. (1996) 'An Identity Agenda in Neorealism', in Lapid, Y. and Kratochwil, F. (eds.) *The Return of Culture & Identity in IR Theory (Critical Perspectives on World Politics)*. Boulder, pp. 105–125.

Posen, B.R. (1993) 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', *Survival*, 35:1, pp. 27–47.

Roe, P. (2000) 'Former Yugoslavia: The security Dilemma That Never Was?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:3, pp. 373–393.

Roe, P. (2002) 'Misperception and Ethnic Conflict: Transylvania's Societal Security Dilemma', *Review of International Studies*, 28:1, pp. 57–74.

Roe, P.F. (2005) *Ethnic violence and the Societal Security Dilemma*. New York.

Stack, J.F. (1986) *The Primordial Challenge: Ethnicity in the Contemporary World*. New York.

Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2002) *Statistični urad RS – Popis 2002*. Available at: [http://www.stat.si/popis2002/en/rezultati/rezultati\\_red.asp?ter=SLO&st=7](http://www.stat.si/popis2002/en/rezultati/rezultati_red.asp?ter=SLO&st=7) (Accessed: 14 November 2016).

Williams, D.U. (2015) 'How Useful are the Main Existing Theories of Ethnic Conflict?', *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4:1, pp. 147–151.

*Written by: Gareth Jonas*  
*Written at: University of Birmingham*  
*Written for: Dr Rita Floyd*  
*Date written: December 2016*