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Yugoslavia's Contested Past: A Special Issue

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This special issue of *History* brings together four articles on the social and cultural history of the former Yugoslavia. All of the authors examine the region's contested past and the politics of identity and memory with particular emphasis on the impact of the communist (or what people from the region usually refer to as socialist) and nationalist experiments.

As a country, Yugoslavia (i.e. a state that brought together the South Slavs) had several different forms in the last century. From 1918 to 1941 a monarchy, ruled by the Karadorđević dynasty, called itself Yugoslavia. King Aleksandar, who was assassinated by fascists in France in 1934, was thought by many to be a military hero. He led Serbia's army from the front in the First World War and was granted the right to augment his kingdom in 1918 by his wartime allies. Others, including Croatian and Macedonian nationalists, were less convinced by his positive qualities and considered him to be a tyrannical dictator who had forced peoples to live in a single state. Aleksandar's personal rule was followed by a brief Regency that was toppled by the Third Reich in 1941. Although the Karadorđević regime was repressive, it was replaced by regimes that were far more violent.

During the Second World War, more than a million people from the region died, many at the hands of fellow Yugoslavs rather than the occupation forces. Rival nationalists fought for the control of the central part of the state (nowadays Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina). Many Croats and Bosnian Muslims joined the fascists, killing hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Serbs. Many Serbs joined pro-Karadorđević guerrilla groups who killed thousands of Bosnian Muslims. After 1945, the problems that had dogged the first Yugoslavia never really went away. Despite their victory in the war, the communists led by Josip Broz Tito still faced formidable internal opposition from nationalists. From 1945 until 1990 they stayed in power with a policy of enforced multi-nationalism (or what they called 'brotherhood and unity') and heavy repression of opponents.

In many ways, the Yugoslav communists did create a unique society with distinctive aesthetics, memorials and public culture in sport,

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explored here by Richard Mills. In this society, a footballer who had had a distinguished combat record in the Spanish Civil War or Second World War could be elevated to the status of both local and national hero. After the collapse of communism, Yugoslavia fragmented into small national states. Serbia and Montenegro continued to call themselves the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia until 2003. The battle between integral Yugoslav projects and nationalist alternatives has meant that the past is remembered and even commemorated in rival ways as Mills suggests. Whereas football heroes were once regarded as part of a kind of proletarian vanguard, they are now admired for different qualities. In Bosnia, this means that footballers who fell in the 1990s war are often commemorated as *šehidi* or Muslim martyrs.

The constant use of 'anti-fascist' rhetoric by Tito's regime, as well as its use by more recent politicians, is discussed here by Nebojša Čagorović. He argues that the past has been used by unscrupulous politicians to justify abuses of power, including the attacks on the city of Dubrovnik in 1991 and the expulsion of Bosnian Muslims from Montenegro the following year. Čagorović is also acutely aware that public memorials can depend heavily on local politics. In some Montenegrin towns, Partisan memorials have been preserved, whereas in other places all trace of the recent past has been erased.

Changes in boundaries and political projects led to levels of existential insecurity unknown to inhabitants of more stable countries. A person who was born in the Istrian town of Poreč in 1910 and who died in 1995 would have lived in the Habsburg Monarchy, Mussolini's Italy, communist Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia even if they never travelled more than five miles from their home. Regime change frequently involved violence. State documents were issued in different languages. In the 1920s, families were encouraged to change their surnames to make them sound less Slavonic or German. Postage stamps and currencies were altered with frequency. Everything from the school curriculum, public monuments, street names and titles of newspapers would have changed many times in those eighty-five years. In some areas, including Poreč, those deemed to be 'minority' populations were either expelled or forced to adopt new customs and languages. Not only would a person who was born in this Istrian town have to blot out the memory of being ruled by Franz Joseph, Benito Mussolini and eventually Josip Broz Tito, they might also have had to forget their 'missing' neighbours (whose houses they might well have occupied after their expulsion). Poreč was certainly not unique. Most towns and cities in the region would have undergone a similar process of change. The Adriatic town of Kotor has been controlled by eight different political regimes since 1914 (Habsburg, Karadorđević, Italian, Croatian, communist Yugoslav, Federal Yugoslav and Montenegrin as well as having been part of Serbia-Montenegro from 2003 to 2006). The work of the novelist Danilo Kiš, discussed here by John Cox, reflected this tension between the truth, frequent regime change and the mundane lies found both in politics and in everyday life.

Kiš is one of the best-known post-1945 Yugoslav writers and Cox introduces new material on this elusive thinker in his article.

Most of the Yugoslav lands faced the dual challenges of endemic poverty and illiteracy. Both problems were tackled by twentieth-century regimes with some notable success. Most South Slavs learned to read and move beyond a subsistence economy. But this transition to modernity was never straightforward. Slovenia, discussed here by Nina Vodopivec, was economically more developed and already industrialized in the nineteenth century, but still faced problems after the end of communism in 1990. As she argues, many factory workers look back nostalgically to a past when they felt they were valued more highly and resent the present state of affairs and the 'free' market. Even in the most successful cases of transition (such as Slovenia) there are still many people who feel more at home in the past than the present. Often political loyalty is determined within families or, as Vodopivec suggests, within generations. 'Yugonostalgia' and the cult of Josip Broz Tito is still quite a vibrant phenomenon in some places. Similarly, nationalists have their ceremonials, special events and pantheon of alternative heroes. Read together, these articles give us a very mixed view of the transition from integral Yugoslav regimes to nationalist ones. This is certainly not a triumphal narrative of progress and improvement.

Cathie Carmichael, University of East Anglia, May 2012