



Was Tito's Yugoslavia totalitarian?



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ABSTRACT

State authorities in Croatia and Slovenia have recently indiscriminately designated Tito's Yugoslavia as totalitarian without reservations. Neither of these authorities referred to any systematic considerations of totalitarianism, nor did they analyze the manner of the alleged system's presence and its time limits. The current paper indicates that, from the middle of the 60s, millions of copies of religious newspapers were published and economic enterprises operated beyond the state command economy. In addition, the republics were largely autonomous players and catered for their own interests. Although Tito's cult was promoted, his power was limited by the federal nature of the state. Neither any other elements of totalitarianism could be found.

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1. Introduction

The state of Yugoslavia was first established as a result of events at the end of World War I, only to be dismembered during World War II; reestablished by Tito's Communist Partisan movement during the same war and then to remain a communist/socialist state until 1990/91, when it was finally dissolved (Dedijer et al., 1972; Ramet, 2006).

The integration, functioning and dissolution of Yugoslavia are issues producing very different scholarly assessment. For example, whereas Wachtel and Bennett (2009, 13) pay great respect to the personality of Tito, attributing the survival of the state "largely to [his] adeptness", Meier (1999, 2) considers his style as something demonstrating "his experience working in the Comintern", which was, of course, known for blind organizational subjugation and ruthlessness. Such ambiguity is to be expected, since the internal disputes about Yugoslavia, as well as the enduring disagreements about its demise, are many. At this point we shall limit ourselves to the opinion expressed by Jović (2009), who considers "the Serbian question" to be the dominant one during this state, in contrast to the first Yugoslavia, when it was "the Croatian question". These questions reflect some of the basic tensions, disturbances and imbalances, which are beyond the scope of the current paper.¹

The main aim of the current study is limited to the assessment of Yugoslavia's political regime. Specifically, the current study taps into the issue of whether "second," that is, post-World War II Yugoslavia was a totalitarian state. Namely, in the lands of the former Yugoslavia the use of the term "totalitarian" is frequent in public speech, but interestingly, only in two cases has official denotation been made by competent authorities in identifying the nature of government in the period 1945–1990. The first can be traced to 2006, when the Croatian Parliament adopted a declaration on "the condemnation of crimes committed during the totalitarian communist system in Croatia, 1945–1990" (Narodne Novine, 2006).² The second

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¹ For more in-depth analysis one may consult, for example, Klanjšek and Flere (2011).

² This Declaration invokes the Declaration adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 1996 on the same issue, where totalitarianism is primarily designated by "hyper-centralism", a quality which certainly does not pertain to Yugoslavia (Parliamentary Assembly: Resolution, 1096, 1996).

occurs in the 2011 ruling of the Constitutional Court of Slovenia. It annulled a decision by the Ljubljana Municipality, which wanted to name a road under construction after the Josip Broz Tito. In the judgment, the Court mentioned “Tito’s symbolic meaning” associated with “the post-war totalitarian communist regime”, and affirmed that “Tito symbolizes the totalitarian regime” (*Ustavno Sodišče RS: U–I-109/10, 2011*). In addition, the Slovenian Court also designated the entire period “totalitarian”, with no substantive or temporal reservations.

In sum, the intention of the current paper is not to assess the political order of Yugoslavia in the period 1945–1990 in entirety, even less to justify it. The sole aim is to provide insight into whether the designation “totalitarian” is appropriate for Yugoslavia as ruled by Tito and the order set up under him in this period. To do this, the concept of totalitarianism should first be clearly explained.

2. Totalitarianism

In political science the notion of totalitarianism is said to have been introduced by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956) in their famous book *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. The authors point out the following elements characteristic of totalitarian regime: an official ideology considered “chiliastic”; a hierarchically organized mass party led by a dictator; a terrorist police force; a monopoly on armed combat forces; a monopoly on mass media; and central control of the economy by state planning (1956, 9–10). Many authors find this definition to be the most authoritative (Heywood, 2007, 73–74; Apter, 1996; Holmes, 2001), although there are other definitions that were constructed with a particular view to the long existence of Soviet-type Communism, with the goal of accounting for the changes and variations that existed in various non-democratic systems across the globe. An important one was built by Kassof (1964), who, when speaking about totalitarianism, writes of an “administered society”, “characterized by a growing size and importance of an elite party and state bureaucracy” (1964, 599) that “operates by and large without resorting to those elements of gross irrationality (in particular the large scale and often self-defeating use of psychological terror and physical coercion)” (Kassof, 1964, 559).

Although the former is in line with Friderich and Brzezinski’s definition (the idea of a single state and apparatus vs. the mass), the latter introduces an important element which bifurcates the concept of totalitarianism. In essence, Kassof (1964, 561) introduces a distinction between “irrational” and “rational” totalitarianism. This can also be discerned when he notes that, although the pressure may have diminished as “substantial liberalization has taken place” (under Krushchev), this is seen only as “a tactical regrouping on the march from a relatively primitive to a far more advanced variety of twentieth-century totalitarianism” (Kassof, 1964, 575). In other words, in his effort to account for a change in the system, Kassof introduces the distinction between “primitive” and “advanced” totalitarianism, where the difference should be understood in the context of the functionalization and streamlining of totalitarianism, where counterproductive elements are eliminated only to make the machine more operational and efficient, in comparison to the immediate post-revolution “irrationalities”.

This argument is interesting in relation to a point made by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956) and others (Kirkpatrick, 1979), who consider communist systems as phenomena impervious to reform. Specifically, they argue that totalitarian systems cannot be transformed into more rationalized ones, even less into democratic or liberal ones; they can only become increasingly “total” (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956, 293–303). However, Kassof’s writing does imply that this change is possible, but that this process of “substantial liberalization” should be understood only in the context of making the system more totalitarian.

We would argue that such conceptualization produces numerous difficulties, the main one being the de-solidification of the concept of totalitarianism, which renders the term difficult to use. Although such endeavors are common in the social sciences, they often instigate discussion that adds little value to the explanation of particular social phenomena (since they revolve around the issue of “who meant what”). In addition, if we take, for example, Kassof’s rationale and apply it to the concept of democracy, we might end by arguing that the potential change that limits the civic liberties should be understood as something that strengthens democratic rule (since liberalization would need to be understood – idiosyncratically – as something that strengthens totalitarianism). Bearing this in mind, the current study will try to avoid such issues by focusing on a more straightforward definition of totalitarianism: the one introduced by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956).

3. Yugoslavia – a totalitarian state?

There can be no doubt that the triumphant Yugoslav communists in 1945 had effectively begun to introduce in Yugoslavia a system with key totalitarian features. Such an intent pursues from the following: (1) doing away with the multi-party system and particularly with political opposition (Koštunica and Čavoški, 1983), and the establishment of the rule of a vanguard party; (2) mass extra-judicial executions immediately after the war (although this was not unique to Yugoslavia but significantly surpassed the incidence in France, for example (Judt, 2007), becoming even a kind of mass intimidation), as the first step in the introduction of a potent political police; (3) organizing the economy by doing away with private ownership in agriculture with catastrophic consequences (Borak, 2002); (4) control of mass media (Koštunica and Čavoški, 1983); (5) the establishment of armed forces subordinate to the Party; and (6) an official communist ideology seen as redemptive or “chiliastic”, which had a monopoly position in public life (Jančar, 1998; Cvetković, 2011; Rodić, 1995).

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