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Revolutionary Brothers: The Communist Formula for Yugoslavia

Eric Hobsbawm once remarked that ‘each Communist party was the child of the marriage of two ill-assorted partners, a national Left and the October revolution. That marriage was based both on love and convenience’ (2001: 3). In other words, it was the marriage between the specific national circumstances that required a corresponding political strategy and the imperative of a Moscow-led world revolution and, as was often the case, its own particular state interests. The two agendas did not always go hand in hand and the outcome of any clash between them was usually detrimental to the political position of national Communist parties within their own societies. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia was not an exception to the rule until its break with Stalin in 1948. However, classic (im)balances between nationalism and internationalism in the communist struggles in South-Slavic lands took the form of a complex relationship between separate ethnic nationalisms (Serb, Croatian and Slovene), Yugoslavism that would later on be turned into a specific South-Slavic inter-nationalism, Balkan regionalism and global internationalism.

In order to properly answer the question of why Yugoslavia was *re*-unified as a socialist multinational federation in 1945 and how an entirely different conception of citizenship was actually developed through decades of theoretical and political struggles, one must first examine the history of two intellectual and political traditions that shaped the discussions, opinions, political meandering and, ultimately, the decisions of Yugoslav communists: on the one hand, Marxist tradition and the debates within the Marxist movement on the national question and the form of the socialist state, and, on the other, Yugoslavism as the ideology of South-Slavic national and political unity.

For more than a century and a half the relationship between Marxism and nationalism was at different times either conflicted or complementary. The conflicts between the two ideologies that grew significantly around the same

time in the nineteenth century were a matter of principle. The complementarities between them, on the other hand, were more the product of historical and political realism. Nationalism was not a phenomenon destined to wither away so soon, as Marxists had predicted and hoped, and ignorance of this bitter fact would prove politically harmful. Marxists thus had to learn how to come to terms with nationalism and even how to manipulate it for their own ends (Connor 1984: 6). In addition, nationalists of various stripes equally learned how to manipulate demands for social justice and equality for their own agenda.

South-Slavic Marxists found themselves, ideologically and politically, in a rather confusing situation. From the very outset, they had to face two opponents who appeared in the guise of nationalism and had to be either fought or accommodated: the separate South-Slavic ethnic nationalisms on the one hand and, on the other, Yugoslavism that aspired to unite linguistically and culturally similar South Slavs in a common state. On the plane of ideology, Marxists had to overcome the philosophical incompatibility between the internationalist class struggle and local nationalist demands which cut across class lines. In the South-Slavic lands, the task was even more complex as two parallel nationalist movements – one seeking higher Yugoslav unity, the other arguing for the separate political autonomy of ethnic groups – often complemented one another, but at other times were in open conflict. Moreover, the political and territorial ambitions entailed by the various ethnic nationalisms often collided with each other. Eventually, as elsewhere, a marriage of necessity brought the two together. Yugoslav communists had to acknowledge that nationalism was a potent political force. They thus continued searching for a political project that could successfully combine both social and national emancipation in the context of developed and often mutually exclusive national projects of neighbouring groups. In this chapter, I show how the Yugoslav communists ‘discovered’ the successful federalist formula for the socialist re unification of Yugoslavia after the Second World War as well as how, as with any ‘successful’ formula, its discovery was preceded by numerous fruitless experiments.

Yugoslav communists: Solving the national question

The roots of the formula: Marxism and the national question

The Austro-Marxist approach to nations and nationalism, developed within multinational Austria–Hungary, would leave a long-lasting influence on Yugoslav communists, especially Tito and Edvard Kardelj. Yugoslav communists

inherited many ideas on the national question either directly from Austrian Marxists (the South Slavs being part of the Austrian Socialist party) or via Moscow (Stalin himself was significantly influenced by Austro-Marxists as well). Generally, the experience of Austria–Hungary in which both Kardelj and Tito were born and raised provided a number of solutions already, from duality of the Monarchy and special federal arrangements, including sub-state and provincial autonomies, to dual citizenship (the separate citizenship regimes of Hungary and Austria). It comes as no surprise that the national question was debated within large multinational empires, such as Czarist Russia and Austria–Hungary, where the workers’ movement already suffered from deep divisions along ethnonational lines. This problem forced the leaders of the Austrian Social Democrats to take the national issue into serious consideration. Their efforts to do so would result in some of the most influential contributions to the debate on the national question, some of which retain their relevance even in contemporary political circumstances.¹

In 1897, the Austrian Socialist Party (also called *Gesamtpartei*) was transformed into a federative organization of six national parties (Ukrainian, Czech, Polish, German, Italian and Slovene) with a common executive committee.² Two years later, at the Congress of Brno, the programme regarding the national question was adopted in favour of transforming Austria into ‘a democratic federation of nationalities’. Karl Renner was first to develop the idea of non-territorial national cultural autonomy and the ‘personality principle’ which argued that membership of a national association would be a matter of personal choice (Nimni 2000: xxv). Seriously concerned by the negative effects that the conflict between Czechs and Germans could have within the Socialist movement, young Otto Bauer wrote his celebrated volume *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* (1907). In Bauer’s view, the ‘unitary nation [is] a community of education, work, and culture’ (Bauer 2000 [1907]: 118). Bauer stresses the importance of ‘common history’ that constructs the national character and introduces, via his concept of ‘a common area of habitation’ (115), the *territorial* principle (which later influenced Stalin’s own definition of the nation) as a necessary element of a nation’s survival. However, ‘communities of character’ survive in spite of their being geographically separated – diasporic communities serve as proof – if they remain in contact with their culture, which as in Bauer’s time, and even more today, is facilitated by modern means of communication.

Lenin’s entry into the Marxist debate on the national question turned out to be decisive for the communist movement. On the issue of nations and nationalism, Lenin remained torn between his conflicting roles as a *Marxist philosopher* who pays respect to his intellectual tradition, a *socialist politician* seeking the

most effective political strategy in pre-revolutionary and wartime Russia, and *the leader of the Revolution* confronted on a daily basis with complicated and changing circumstances. Lenin as philosopher stuck to classical Marxist theory, which posits a direct causal link between the bourgeoisie and the nation. In his *Critical Remarks on the National Question* (1913), Lenin stresses the utter incompatibility between Marxism and nationalism and advances a theory of two cultures in every nation, one of the dominant bourgeois class and the other one of the exploited masses. On the other hand, Lenin as a socialist politician realized the monumental political mistake socialists had been making by neglecting the national problem for so long. As with Marx and Engels before him, Lenin had to answer the question of *when* the matching of the two would be mutually beneficial (his answer being when they fight absolutism and build a bourgeois-democratic state), and under what circumstances the combination would endanger socialism (the answer here being when a mature bourgeoisie uses nationalism against the proletariat). Lenin thus distinguishes between the nationalisms of oppressing nations and those of the oppressed. Lenin therefore presented himself an ardent advocate of the right of nations to self-determination and secession. Lenin the philosopher and Lenin the political realist reconciled on the following point: although nations will eventually wither away, for the moment being they hold a strategic political importance that must not be neglected.

In 1913, the Party sent Stalin to Vienna to study Austro-Marxism and to write a response to Renner's and Bauer's theories. As often happens in these kinds of intellectual and ideological encounters, Stalin's critique revealed a high degree of contamination by the ideas of his adversaries. For him, 'a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture' (Stalin 1953 [1913]: 307). Lenin's distinction between two kinds of nationalisms is notably absent from his theory. Eventually, Stalin's most lasting contribution to the debate would remain the territorial principle.

Soon after the principle of self-determination was practically applied through the creation of national Soviet republics – regardless of the actual degree of their independence – the Bolsheviks were obliged to consider formal relations between these subunits and the centre. Federalism, confederalism and autonomy were debated with (again contradictory) goals in mind: how to reconcile political centralism with the territorial and political autonomy of self-determined nations? This turned out to be a perennial problem for them and all future multinational socialist federations.

Before Yugoslavia

Before April 1919 when the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) was established under the short-lived name of the Socialist Workers Party of Yugoslavia (Communists), the socialist movement in the South-Slavic lands was fragmented along existing borders and had a late start by comparison with its West European counterparts. The Social-Democratic Party of Croatia and Slavonia was established in 1894. As Dalmatia was under the tutelage of Vienna, and not of Budapest as Croatia proper and Slavonia, contacts between socialists in the south and north of today's Croatia were weak. The significantly named *Yugoslav* Social Democratic Party was established in Slovenia in 1896. On the other side of the southeastern Habsburg border, across the Danube, the Serbian Social Democratic Party was founded in 1903. In spite of this fragmentation, there was a widespread awareness of the need for closer cooperation between socialist-minded South Slavs. Nevertheless, political, economic and social differences between the Habsburg South Slavs and Serbia were impossible to ignore. These differences, in turn, influenced their respective socialist programmes as well as their views on the national question, a question that was obviously a different matter in multinational Austria–Hungary than in the nascent Serbian nation-state.

At first, Croatian socialists demanded no more than broader autonomy and did not radically question the existing relations with Budapest and Vienna (Djilas 1991: 40). But already at their second congress they called for full autonomy for Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia (Shoup 1968: 15). They insisted on cooperation with Serbian comrades, opposed anti-Serbian sentiments in Croatia, and believed that the diverse 'tribes' should be united into one Yugoslav nation. Serbian socialists, looking at the matter from Belgrade, acknowledged certain *national* differences (Djilas 1991: 44). They were, for the most part, internationalist and anti-imperialist – in other words, opposed to Austrian expansion in the Balkans – and advocated a Balkan federation. In 1910, the Social Democratic Parties of Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece indeed formed the Balkan Social-Democratic Federation. Serbian socialists continued to advocate a Balkan federation (with Macedonia as an entity) throughout the First World War, but the conflict between Serbia and Bulgaria made the idea unrealistic. By 1918, the left-wing of the Party called for a more viable Greater Serbian state that would incorporate Bosnia, Herzegovina and Dalmatia (Shoup 1968: 18).

Austria–Hungary's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 sparked the first conflicts between Croatian and Slovenian socialists and their Serbian

colleagues (Djilas 1991: 45). For Croats and Slovenes, the annexation actually meant strengthening of the South-Slavic bloc within the Monarchy, whereas Serbs perceived it as an imperialist move that would affect Serbia's own (deemed more legitimate) aspirations in Bosnia. The following year a conference of Habsburg Yugoslav socialists ('Konferencija socijalista Jugoslavena') took place in Ljubljana. At the end of the conference the highly significant 'Tivoli resolution' was adopted.³ In the resolution, Yugoslav socialists stressed the 'colonial character' of the position in which Yugoslavs living in Austria–Hungary found themselves. The Yugoslav socialists seemed to support the Bauerian idea of autonomy for each nation in the sphere of national-cultural questions within an Austria–Hungary united as an economic region, regardless of historical boundaries. They stated three main goals of their programme: (1) the national unification of all South Slavs regardless of existing differences in name, religion, grammar and dialect or language; (2) a national constitution regardless of all artificial state, legal and political boundaries, together with a common national autonomous life for each group as 'a free unit' within a totally democratic confederation of peoples; (3) the struggle for the total democratization of the Dual Monarchy.

At the outbreak of the First World War, South-Slavic socialists were divided between several mutually exclusive possibilities for South-Slavic political independence in the twentieth century. Aleksa Djilas sums up four of the general socialist proposals as follows: (1) South Slavs would form an autonomous unit within a decentralized and liberal-democratic Habsburg monarchy (clearly without an independent Serbia and Montenegro); (2) Austria–Hungary would be transformed into a Danubian federation within which South Slavs will have their own unit (with or without Serbia and Montenegro); (3) a Balkan federation would be created with or without Habsburg South Slavs (the option advocated in Serbia) and finally, (4) an independent decentralized Yugoslav state (1991: 44). Obviously, only the fourth proposal prescribed the unification of all South Slavs within their own national state. If in the pre-1914 world it was not the most realistic vision on the table, the dramatic twists and turns of the Great War allowed it to be realized in a form that Yugoslav socialists would accept only half-heartedly. Although it did result in the actual unification of South Slavs, their independent state acquired a monarchical and conservative form.

Communists in the first Yugoslavia

Although the Yugoslav socialists were generally in favour of the new state, in April 1920 the Communist International (Comintern) presented a 'Manifesto'

to the Balkan communists that called for the immediate destruction of the unjust 'Versailles' order in the Balkans and for the emancipation of oppressed nations. This implied the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, the very term being viewed by the Comintern as nothing more than another name for 'the rule of the Serbian bureaucratic and landowning oligarchy'. The solution proposed for Yugoslav nations implied their incorporation into a 'Federation of Socialist Balkan (or Balkan and Danubian) Soviet Republics'. 'Somewhat paradoxically, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia elected to endorse the goal while ignoring the prescribed means' (Connor 1984: 133). In other words, the CPY wanted Yugoslavia as such to become a member of the future Soviet Federation. Their silent defiance was confirmed in the programme adopted at the Vukovar congress only two months later in June 1920. They kept this line until the Comintern started to employ more serious measures of persuasion, which, in turn, provoked a significant theoretical and political split among Yugoslav communists.

In the founding congress' 'practical action programme', the Party advocates 'one national state with broadest autonomy of regions, counties and municipalities'. It demands, however, the 'protection of national minorities' and, interestingly, 'total juridical and political equality of non-citizens and citizens' (in Kobsa et al. 1978: 179–180). In line with classic Marxist teaching, it hails unification and centralism (but not of the bourgeois kind!) since larger economic units are beneficial to general development and, eventually, the communist revolution (Djilas 1991: 59). The communists thus oppose separatism in favour of local autonomy, insist on the primacy of class struggle and generally, until 1923 perceive the national question as yet another bourgeois trick. In 1920 the Party did extraordinarily well in the municipal elections (especially in larger cities such as Belgrade where the communist Filip Filipović was elected mayor) and in the elections for the Constituent Assembly in November of the same year, a success that propelled the CPY to the position of the third strongest party in the Parliament. However, only a month later, the CPY was outlawed by the Royal 'Pronouncement' ('Obznana'), resulting in a rapid decline in the Party's membership and political influence over the next decade.

During the years in which the national question plagued Yugoslav politics and society, the Communists' obstinate blindness to the problem only accelerated their political marginalization. In July 1922, a 'Resolution on the political situation and the Party's primary tasks' was adopted at the First CPY conference. It acknowledged that the theory of national unity, as presented by the Serbian bourgeoisie, only served the interests of Serbian imperialism. For the Party, the principle of self-determination was the only solution to all 'national

and tribal' oppression, but full national and economic liberation would become possible only through revolution and within a Balkan Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (in Kobsa et al. 1978: 185). A year later the major and determining conflict on the national question erupted between the right-wing and the left-wing of the Party.

The right-wing of the Party approved the Party's earlier stance on the national question. Its leader Sima Marković portrays the national question as a matter of conflict between the Serbian, Slovenian and Croatian bourgeoisies over economic resources; the 'national' conflict thus 'blurs' what was essentially a class struggle. The Party should insist on pure class struggle, the national question being reduced to nothing more than a 'constitutional question' that could be solved by the democratization of political life and amendments to the 1921 Constitution. These would guarantee equality of Serbs, Slovenes and Croats and secure the political autonomy of the regions. Marković interestingly saw Yugoslavia as a union of sovereign nations though not of sovereign states (Djilas 1991: 69), and, therefore, he opposed federalism as an arrangement that would, as many Marxists feared, only fragment the working class (Marković 1985 [1923]). The right-wing's anti-federalist, but also anti-unitarist position provoked a backlash from the left-wing of the CPY that favoured the federal solution (Banac 1988: 54–55). The left-wing endorsed the Leninist principle of 'self-determination to secession' and rejected Marković's constitutional measures and his insistence on class struggle, since, in their opinion, the national question involved all classes. They argued that separatist nationalisms could be tolerated, provided caution was exercised regarding the 'purposefulness' of secession in each case (Cvijić 1978 [1923]: 202–203). The most prominent contributors from the left-wing faction were Đuro Cvijić and the expressionist Croatian writer August Cesarec who, in an article from August of 1923, recognized the historical importance of the South-Slavic unification but, on the other hand, rejected its present monarchic form in favour of a republican federation (1978 [1923]: 193–196).⁴

The federalists had the upper hand at the Third CPY conference in Belgrade in January 1924. The adopted 'Resolution on the National Question' for the first time links national and social emancipations in the Party's revolutionary strategy, a blend that would turn out to be critical two decades later. The Resolution accused the Serbian bourgeoisie for its initial failure at the creation of the Yugoslav nation (in Kobsa et al. 1978: 221–225). The creation of one nation in Yugoslavia was aborted at its birth, which set in motion ever-deepening national

antagonisms and eventually produced three independent nations (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). The Serbian bourgeoisie was to blame for its colonial expansionist policy against Macedonia (which had been subjected to 'Serbianization') and Albania dating back to before the First World War, its exploitation of Slovenia and Croatia (and even of their respective bourgeoisies) and the destruction of Montenegro's, Bosnia's and Vojvodina's autonomy. On the other hand, the *separation* of nations might not always be 'purposeful'. Therefore, to recognize the right to secession in the abstract would not prevent the Party's agitation against it in particular cases, because – the Resolution curiously argues, a belief that will persist somehow until the last Yugoslav Constitution of 1974 – 'the fuller the freedom to self-determination, the weaker is separatism.' The 1924 Resolution would go on to have enormous significance for the later history of Yugoslavia. The Party acknowledged the end of the Yugoslav nation-building project and emphasized the state-building of the future federal Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, during the two following decades Yugoslav communists hesitated between the total rejection of Yugoslavia – the position they adopted under the Comintern's instruction between 1924–1925 and 1934–1935 – and variations of the federalist solution.

The open factional conflicts over the national problem within the CPY forced the Comintern to react half a year later at the Fifth congress of the Communist International and to openly criticize the right-wing of the CPY. The right of nations to self-determination in the South-Slavic lands, as interpreted by the Comintern, basically meant the immediate dismemberment of royalist Yugoslavia or, what would have effectively amounted to the same thing, its profound reorganization. Stalin himself confirmed this position in March 1925. At the Fifth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, a conflict erupted between Stalin and Sima Marković.⁵ Stalin argued that the national programme of the Party must include the right of nations to self-determination and secession, or national territorial autonomy for those nationalities that would like to stay in Yugoslavia. He not only left the door open for the eventual survival of Yugoslavia as a state, but offered a very important instruction for its future organizational structure: Yugoslavia itself, he maintained, would be transformed into '*a federation of autonomous national states based upon the Soviet system* [emphasis added]' (in Kobsa et al. 1978: 229–231). Yugoslav communists followed the Comintern's orders. Until 1934–1935, the immediate dismemberment of Yugoslavia and creation of independent Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia remained the Party's line.

From rejection to defence of Yugoslavia

The Comintern radically changed – overnight, as it were – its policy towards Yugoslavia at the end of 1934 and confirmed this new direction in 1935. Faced with Hitler's rise to power and the necessity of a strong anti-fascist coalition, the Comintern's leadership realized that encouraging Yugoslavia's dissolution had actually been serving its enemy's strategy. The CPY once more obediently followed the new line and keenly returned to the federalist formula, which was generally more acceptable to the aspirations of its rank and file. In Yugoslavia itself, the Party had lost a huge number of members and many faithful communists were either in prison or in exile. It is clear that Moscow's arcane global policies played a pivotal role in forcing the CPY to reject Yugoslavism between 1924 and 1934, but this harmful shift took place at a moment of widespread disillusionment with the Yugoslav project among non-Serb nationalities and of general discontent with King Alexander's dictatorship and his policy of integral Yugoslavism. In this context, the CPY actually rejected Yugoslavism – already understood not as nationalism but as South-Slavic inter-nationalism – in the name of an internationalism within the Balkans or even a greater regional and, eventually, world socialist federation. In spite of a whole decade of, from the perspective of later events, embarrassing behaviour vis-à-vis Yugoslavia, the CPY remained the only true *Yugoslav* political party that had any relevance throughout Yugoslavia itself (Djilas 1991: 78).

In the spring of 1934, the Comintern still encouraged the secession of Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia from Yugoslavia. In June 1934, the CPY signed a pact with Italian and Austrian communists on the creation of a united and independent Slovenia (Shoup 1968: 39). The first signal of the change to follow was issued in December of 1934 at the CPY's Fourth National Conference. The Party suddenly stopped calling for the immediate break-up of Yugoslavia and made a historically important decision for the CPY itself (contributing in a way to its final dissolution more than a half century later) and the future socialist Yugoslavia; it obliged itself to establish separate Communist Parties of Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia. The CP of Slovenia was indeed founded in April of 1937 with the creation of the CP of Croatia following in August that year.

The true turning point came the following year. In March 1935, the Central Committee (CC) of the CPY ceased labelling Yugoslavia an 'imperialist creation'. Instead, it stressed regional autonomy, most importantly for Croatia, but this time avoided any call for the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In June 1935, at the Split plenum of the CPY's Central Committee, the shift was publicly announced.

Yugoslavia should be preserved as a federation of autonomous national units. In 1937, the CPY dropped the term 'self-determination' from its operational vocabulary and continued to condemn separatism. But only a year later, Moscow sent another confusing signal after signing the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression agreement in August 1939. The CPY was instructed to adopt a pacifist and neutral attitude towards Yugoslavia, instead of supporting or agitating against it.

In October 1940, six months before the invasion of Yugoslavia by the Axis forces, the Fifth Conference of the CPY took place in Zagreb. Its Resolution echoes the deep national grievances and discontents that required the Party to put at the top of its political agenda 'the most important and acute task – the struggle for the national equality of the oppressed peoples and nationalities of Yugoslavia' (Tito 1978: 4). Whereas the Resolution rehearses well-known phrases, Tito's speech at this Conference deserves a closer look.⁶ Tito criticizes the former Party leaders (Sima Marković and Milan Gorkić had both already disappeared in Stalin's purges)⁷ for not understanding the national question. 'And all the time, the answer was there, in their own hands, had they only known it'. But what was this answer? To this question, Tito offers a rather intriguing formula: 'national autonomy, the condition for social revolution; diversity of national cultures – the condition for political uniformity'.⁸ Tito significantly points to the Soviet Union as, in his opinion, 'the model for the multinational state, the model for what Yugoslavia with its varied *races* must become' [emphasis added]. In the next sentence, he fleshes out the Party's exclusive ownership of 'the solution' of the national question in Yugoslavia: 'Never forget, comrades, that the party which dares to bring this solution to Yugoslavia must become its master. And never forget that we, and we alone, have this solution.'

Wartime: Enemies or brothers?

Tito was right. Only the Party, on the eve of war, combined the solution of the national question with social emancipation. In other words, through a mutually reinforcing coalition, the federalist formula for a future multinational state could work only if combined with socialist revolution, and *vice versa*. The structural changes within the Party between 1937 and 1941, the political lessons learned, as well as the precious experience collected in prisons, in the battlefields of Spain, in the underground and in coalition with non-communist 'progressive' forces within the Popular front, had made the Party's rank and file ready for war, both ideologically and operationally. Since his appointment in December

1937, Comintern-educated Tito managed swiftly to discipline and unify the Party. The new leadership attracted many new members, especially among the young intelligentsia, coming from all Yugoslav ethnic groups. The Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941 and the Soviet Union in June 1941 served as a trigger for the armed resistance against the occupiers and their local allies.

By November 1943 and the historic Second Session of the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ), the Resistance movement of diverse anti-fascist forces, led and dominated by the CPY, emerged as the only credible partner of the Allies in the war against Hitler. The reasons for such a rapid ascension from being a relatively weak movement to the leading political force of the Resistance (and of the country after its liberation in May 1945) are surely manifold, but there is a general consensus that 'the brilliantly successful national policy' developed by the Communists was 'instrumental in their victory' (Shoup 1968: 60). We do not have enough space here to describe the details of the movement's constantly changing fortunes during the war, the shifts in the Party's strategy or the brutalities and crimes committed by the occupiers and local actors during the inter-ethnic and political civil war that ravaged Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1945, or, for that matter, the post-war revenges of the winners. I will mostly concentrate on the process that engendered the successful formula for post-war Yugoslav unification under Communist rule.

'Possible but not probable' would have been a good answer, had anyone asked in 1941 about the chances for Yugoslavia's resurrection. The odds that Yugoslavia would be resurrected under Communist rule seemed even more far-fetched. The CPY faced powerful occupiers as well as their local nationalist collaborators such as the White Guards in Slovenia, the notorious Ustashe in Croatia responsible for mass killings of Serbs, Jews and Roma and diverse Serbian pro-fascist formations. The Party was also facing competition from the Chetnik movement, led by general Draža Mihailović and loyal to the royal government in London. However, the Chetniks' programme for the restoration of royal Yugoslavia and a territorially and politically reinforced Serb position within the unitarist state did not have much appeal to non-Serbs, who were generally disenchanted with Yugoslavia under the Karadjordjevićs' rule. The Chetniks' general passivity against Germans and Italians, their loose military organization, a series of crimes committed against non-Serb populations (most notably in Eastern Bosnia against the Muslim population) and hostility to the Partisans that brought them ever closer to the occupiers (with whom they openly collaborated in certain regions), discredited the Chetniks as a resistance movement worthy of the Allies' support. On the other hand, the



Figure 2.1 Axis occupation and partition of Yugoslavia in 1941 (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

federalist formula that implied both the restoration of Yugoslavia and the national emancipation of non-Serb nations matched perfectly well with the broad platform of the anti-fascist resistance movement and the promise of social change. This potent vision of a future political community, built on the ashes of the first Yugoslavia, secured for Tito’s Partisans the necessary support base to survive, fight and eventually win the war.

The CPY proved its commitment to the federal solution by establishing, as early as August 1941, separate military commands for each region. The actual organization of the resistance struggle respected ethnic as well as historical

boundaries (Vucinich 1969: 250). In his 1942 article *The National Question in Yugoslavia in Light of the National Liberation Struggle*, Tito confirmed that the 'national-liberation struggle and the national question in Yugoslavia are inseparably related'. The national and regional questions would be 'easily' solved by the people, Tito asserts, 'and each people is acquiring the right to do so', Tito concludes, 'with arms in hand' (Tito 1983: 43–53).

In November 1942, the Anti-fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) was formed in Bihać. In 1943, the anti-fascist councils, as governing legislative and executive bodies, were constituted in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro (together with Boka Kotorska) and Sandžak,⁹ and, in 1944, in Serbia and Macedonia. In November 1943, the regional representatives met in Jajce, in central Bosnia, at the Second Session of the AVNOJ. The AVNOJ declared itself the supreme legislative and executive body of nascent federal Yugoslavia and revoked any right of the 'treacherous' Yugoslav government in exile to represent the peoples of Yugoslavia. The AVNOJ issued a decision on the 'building of Yugoslavia according to the federal principle'. In its first point the AVNOJ states that 'the peoples of Yugoslavia never accepted the partition of the country'. On the contrary, 'in the common armed struggle [they proved] their firm will to remain united in Yugoslavia'. In its second point, federalism was evoked again as the governing principle of future Yugoslavia that would provide for the full equality of Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians and Montenegrins, or, in other words, 'the peoples of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina'. It is interesting to note that in one of the founding documents of the future socialist Yugoslavia the very definition of peoples – the Yugoslav ethnic nations¹⁰ and/or the peoples of the constitutive republics – is imprecise and ambiguous. Two years later, on the second anniversary of the Jajce decisions, these programmatic points were translated into practice: the monarchy was abolished and replaced by the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.

From brothers in arms to federated citizens

The federalist Yugoslavism, as I have shown in the previous and in this chapter, pre-dated Soviet multinational federalism. Only after Moscow's shift in policy towards Yugoslavia in 1934, was the Soviet model, so to speak, re-discovered as an existing and functioning ideal of how federalist Yugoslavism – the type of Yugoslavism that had always commanded a majority following among the

Party's members – could be translated to political reality. It is erroneous thus, in my opinion, to see 'new Yugoslavia' as a pure imitation of, or the product of blind adherence to, the Soviet model. Nevertheless, Soviet guidance was indisputably present during the initial post-war years, and Yugoslav communists looked towards Moscow for many practical solutions. How multinational federalism should actually function was one of them. Power was highly centralized and in several occasions Tito himself had to issue a public reminder of the real meaning of federalism in Yugoslavia. Immediately after the liberation of Zagreb in May 1945, Tito referred to its 'administrative' character: 'The borders of the federal states in federal Yugoslavia are not borders which divide, but borders which unite. What is the meaning of federal units in today's Yugoslavia? We don't consider them a group of small nations; rather they have a more administrative character, the freedom to govern oneself' (see Haug 2012: 110–114).

At the founding congress of the CP of Serbia in 1945, Tito, as if taken by a sudden premonition, once more warns that '... it is not our intention to create states within Yugoslavia which will make war on one another ... It is only a matter of administrative division' (in Banac 1988: 110). However, the first signs of discontent with the new federation soon arose. 'The Partisan federation was too centralist for most non-Serbs and too diffuse for the Serbs' (Banac 1988: 99). The underlying assumption was that the communist federalist formula – that famous formula that only they possessed! – would satisfy elementary national demands, whereas the real agenda – after which the national question would be finally 'eliminated' – is the socialist revolution led by the Party.

In this chapter, I have tried to provide an answer to the general question as to why Yugoslavia was brought back to life as a multinational and socialist federation, after a politically disastrous experience in the inter-war period and its complete disappearance during the Second World War. Almost a 100 years of Marxist debates on the national question resounded heavily within different fractions of the CPY; this led to their contrasting understanding of the Marxist approach to the Yugoslav case. Ultimately, the Soviet model, built on the Leninist–Stalinist interpretation and concrete decisions taken during the October Revolution and the ensuing Civil War, as well as the Comintern's political decisions, had the upper hand. However, this model was not simply *imported* from the Soviet Union. The federalist position was advocated within the Party by its left-wing in the first half of the 1920s and, despite the Comintern caesura between 1924–1925 and 1934–1935, remained the dominant position among Yugoslav communists vis-à-vis Yugoslavia as state. What I call in this chapter 'the federalist formula for the socialist re-unification of Yugoslavia'

proved, eventually, to be an effective tool and possibly the most decisive element of the communist-dominated Resistance's victory in the Second World War. The formula would be constantly questioned, both by its partisans and adversaries, in multiple constitutional and institutional changes and never-ending debates on how to organize the political and economic life of a multinational federation, decisively for Yugoslavia's existence as state between 1989 and 1991.

In a nutshell, Yugoslav communists made three important wartime promises: liberation, a solution to the national question and social emancipation. The first promise was kept in 1945, but the attempts to keep to the other two, inextricably bound together, were to determine the fate of Yugoslavia. National and social emancipations were perceived as conditional upon each other: there could be no socialism without a satisfactory solution to the national question, and, conversely, no satisfactory solution to the national question could be possible without a successful socialist revolution. This implied that every crisis of socialism (economic or political) would cast doubt on the Yugoslav communist solution to the national question. National grievances, on the other hand, inevitably put in question the legitimacy of the socialist regime. In the next chapter, I sketch a history of socialist Yugoslavia as the story of constant efforts to keep these two wartime promises. To keep them meant also to preserve Yugoslavia as a framework for both socialism and the national emancipation of Yugoslav nations and nationalities. The widespread dissatisfaction with the socialist regime and the economic crisis experienced in the 1980s implied also dissatisfaction with the existing solution to the national question and, unavoidably, with Yugoslavia itself.