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Introduction: The Muslim road to the Communist triumph in Yugoslavia

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There have been only two successful, indigenous Communist-led revolutions in Europe's history. The first was the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and the second and last was the revolution in the western Balkans, specifically Yugoslavia and Albania, that took place during World War II. Whereas the first of these revolutions has generated an enormous quantity of scholarly literature in the English language, the second has been largely neglected by historians outside of Yugoslavia and Albania themselves, even though, as with the Russian Revolution, it involved a complete overturning of the political and socio-economic order in the countries involved. This book is intended as a contribution to making good this deficit: it is a study of the Yugoslav Revolution of 1941-1945 in its epicentre, the land of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was the central battlefield of the Yugoslav civil war that spawned the revolution, the home of Josip Broz Tito and the Yugoslav Communist leadership for the best part of the war and the lynchpin of the new Yugoslav order that arose from the revolution.

Many non-Yugoslav historians have touched upon the events of the Yugoslav Revolution, in the course of more general histories of Yugoslavia or the Balkans.¹ Some have summarised it.² Others have written of it through the prism of Allied policy,³ or in the context of the life of Tito.⁴ A few have produced monographs devoted to particular aspects of it or to closely related topics.⁵ Yet none has produced a comprehensive monograph explaining and describing the revolution as a whole. Non-Yugoslav historians have, by and large, rested content with the myth of this revolution, propounded both by its champions and by its opponents since the time it happened: the myth of a pristine Communist revolution carried out by a homogenous all-Yugoslav Communist party, under the stewardship – whether brilliant or diabolical – of Tito, in the wider context of a national liberation struggle against Nazi Germany and other fascist states that occupied Yugoslavia in 1941. The appeal of this myth, even for those who lament Tito's triumph and the role played by Britain and the US in it, has served as a major barrier to the sort of intellectual enquiry that has been so fruitful in producing high-quality historical research on the Bolshevik Revolution. Some historians, sympathetic to Tito and his Communists, fell in love with the heroism of the story as traditionally told; of the Partisan guerrillas who took on and defeated the Axis occupiers, liberating their own country and producing a new Yugoslavia independent enough to defy Stalin and the Soviet Union and build an 'independent road to socialism'. Other, anti-Communist historians remained angry for decades afterwards at what they saw as the ruthlessness of the evil genius Tito, who hoodwinked Churchill into backing his grab for power, enabling his small clique of dedicated revolutionaries to

impose their unrepresentative dictatorship on the land of Yugoslavia.⁶ Yet whether they were Titoist or anti-Titoist in their sympathies, historians remained blinded above all by the myth of 'Yugoslavia', of a single, seamless country that Tito and his Partisans either rescued and redeemed or conquered and raped. Consequently, our interpretative model of Tito's rise to power has scarcely advanced from that of the first, highly impressionistic or subjective accounts by eyewitnesses or contemporaries.⁷

The events of the 1990s have, however, shown us that this version of events is inadequate: Yugoslavia, as a country and as a state, was little more than a house of cards that barely outlived the fall of the Titoist Communist one-party-rule that upheld it. Tito's Yugoslavia was not a genuine country or nation-state; it was a fragile and elaborate compromise that allowed different countries or nation-states to cohabit for less than half a century. The real, enduring national and patriotic loyalties of the Yugoslavs were not to Yugoslavia, but to its constituent lands and peoples: to Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia; and to the Slovene, Croat, Bosniak, Serb, Montenegrin, Albanian, Macedonian and other nationalities. While Yugoslavia vanished, its constituent lands and peoples remained. The nature of Titoist Yugoslavia's demise in the 1990s necessarily raised questions about how it had been created, under the leadership of Tito and the Communists, in the 1940s. For all that historians sympathetic to Tito and the Partisans might romanticise them as embodying the Yugoslav 'essence', the real puzzle, in light of the events of the 1990s, is to explain how they managed to recreate Yugoslavia, after it so ignominiously collapsed in 1941. Then, as fifty years later in 1991, Yugoslavia dissolved with extraordinary bloodshed and destruction, involving multiple genocides. The Partisans managed to recreate Yugoslavia, not just at the state level, but even reintegrating multinational communities at the local and regional level.

This achievement can no longer be explained through reference to a united Yugoslavia as the 'natural' order of things, nor to any great loyalty or identification with the land and state of Yugoslavia on the part of its inhabitants. Unlike the first, monarchical Yugoslav state that had existed on the basis of a unitary constitutional order between 1921 and 1939, the new Yugoslavia established by Tito and the Partisans in the 1940s was not a unitary state. Formally proclaimed at the Second Session of the Antifascist Council for the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia (Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije – AVNOJ) on 29-30 November 1943; its constitution promulgated in January 1946; it was necessarily a federation. It was comprised of six republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia; the last of these included also the autonomous province of Vojvodina and autonomous region of Kosovo-Metohija. Given that in the 1990s, Yugoslavia vanished while the federal units survived, and that now all six republics as well as Kosovo have been recognised as independent states, the establishment of these federal and autonomous units appears retrospectively as a more enduring achievement, on the part of Tito and the Partisans, than the establishment of a new Yugoslavia that proved to be transient. Yet the existing historiography dealing with Tito and the Partisans, particularly in the English language, focuses almost entirely on their all-Yugoslav character and dimension and generally says very little about the character of the revolution in the individual Yugoslav lands, or about how and why the individual republics and autonomous units came to be formed, or about how and why the new Yugoslav federation was organized as it was.

The traditional historical narrative favoured by historians sympathetic to Tito and the Partisans has tended to portray their military successes, and ultimate conquest of power in Yugoslavia as a whole, as the product of excellent military organisation, strict discipline and firm leadership

symbolised by the ‘Proletarian Brigades’ that began to be formed at the end of 1941 and by the ability of the Partisan forces directly commanded by Tito’s Supreme Staff to ward off destruction, in the face of overwhelming odds, at the legendary battles of the Neretva and Sutjeska in the first half of 1943. Not only historians, but members of the general public, even children, with an interest in World War II are likely to have an image in their mind of heroic Yugoslav Partisan guerrillas ambushing and destroying German military convoys in mountain passes. Yet while military prowess should by no means be discounted as an explanation for the Partisan victory, it is far from a sufficient explanation. The lesson of warfare in the former Yugoslavia bequeathed to us by the wars of the 1990s is that it is extremely difficult for even a superior military force to conquer cities and towns in the face of determined resistance by even poorly armed defenders. Hence, the inability of the heavily armed Bosnian Serb forces to capture Sarajevo or other key cities, such as Tuzla or Bihać. The relatively small town of Vukovar in eastern Croatia could withstand a long siege in 1991 by the heavily armed Yugoslav People’s Army, despite the latter’s overwhelming superiority in armaments; it had to be completely destroyed to be conquered. And the capture of towns by all sides in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1991-1995, invariably involved the exodus of their populations, whether as a result of ethnic cleansing by the capturers, planned evacuation by the defenders or fleeing by the population itself to avoid reprisals. At the time of writing, the agonisingly slow conquest of the city of Sirte in Libya by forces of the National Transitional Council, in the face of bitter resistance from those of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, has just been completed – but not before reconfirming this lesson.

The Partisans, by contrast, succeeded in conquering Yugoslavia without either destroying its cities and towns or driving out its civilian population (except in the cases of Yugoslavia’s ethnic German population, and of part of its ethnic Italian population, which were expelled through deliberate policies). This achievement, indeed the Partisan victory itself, may blithely be attributed to the fact that the Partisans, under Communist guidance, were drawn from all Yugoslavia’s peoples and preached ‘brotherhood and unity’; a new Yugoslavia based on equal rights for all, thereby earning them at least a degree of acceptance and trust on the part of all Yugoslavia’s principal nationalities. Yet the reality is that the Partisans were entirely ready to engage in large-scale reprisals against civilians, as the end-of-war massacres of tens of thousands of quisling and collaborationist troops and civilians at Bleiburg and elsewhere demonstrated. Neither popular trust in the Partisans, nor an absence of mass civilian exodus or retaliatory massacres flowed naturally from the Partisans’ multinational Yugoslav ideology. Be this as it may, the Partisans of Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, were a predominantly Serb force (overwhelmingly Serb in the early months of the uprising, dropping to approximately two-thirds Serb by the autumn of 1943) but were nevertheless able to capture Bosnia’s towns and cities from predominantly Croat and Muslim quisling forces, without either engaging in Vukovar-style urban destruction or provoking an exodus of the civilian population.

This is a reflection of the grass roots, ‘from below’ character of the resistance movement led by the Communists – known formally as the People’s Liberation Movement (Narodnooslobodilački pokret – NOP), of which the term ‘Partisans’ more properly refers to the military wing. The traditional historiographical stress on the heroics of Tito and his main force of Partisans, fighting in the hills, mountains and valleys, obscures the activities of the NOP at the grass roots level in the towns and cities, enabling the Partisans to capture Bosnia and other areas through these towns and cities, rather than in opposition to them. Historians of the Bolshevik Revolution have long since demolished the myth that that revolution was simply a *coup* by a clique of dedicated revolutionaries; their research has revealed instead a popular revolution with considerable regional variation, in which local soviets and workers’ councils were sometimes ahead of the Bolshevik

leaders themselves in pushing for the overthrow of Alexander Kerensky's Provisional Government.

⁸ Yet historians of the former Yugoslavia are still stuck with an out-of-date, top-down model of the Yugoslav Revolution, focusing exclusively on the top Communist leadership and mostly ignoring events at the grass-roots level.

The present work is not intended as a comprehensive response to these deficiencies in the existing historiography – nor can any such response ever be comprehensive – but as a major contribution to remedying them. Above all, it aims to fill in the most puzzling of blanks regarding our historiographical picture of the Yugoslav Revolution: the blank surrounding the latter's epicentre, the land of Bosnia-Herzegovina. A large part of the world's population only became aware of this country's existence with the outbreak of war there in 1992. Yet this same country had been the core land of Tito's legendary People's Liberation Movement. Following its expulsion from Serbia at the end of 1941, the Partisan leadership in the form of the Supreme Staff of the People's Liberation Army and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije – KPJ) under Josip Broz Tito made Bosnia its base for the following two and a half years, barring its short excursion into Montenegro in the spring of 1943. In this period, the most legendary events in the history of the Partisan movement occurred, that would form the basis for the mythology of the Yugoslav Communist regime after the war: the founding of the 1st and 2nd Proletarian Brigades; the 'Long March' across Bosnia; the convening of the 1st Session of AVNOJ at Bihać; the Battles of the Neretva and the Sutjeska; the convening of the 2nd Session of AVNOJ at Jajce and the founding of the new Yugoslav state; and the German attack on Tito's headquarters at Drvar.

True, it was Serbia, as the dominant land of pre-war Yugoslavia and home of the Yugoslav capital of Belgrade, that was ultimately most important for determining the victory or defeat of the Yugoslav Partisans' revolution. Yet the Partisan seizure of Serbia, which took place in the autumn of 1944, necessitated the prior establishment of a firm Partisan bastion in Bosnia, as a necessary springboard for a push eastward. Bosnia, as well as other Yugoslav lands outside of Serbia, was needed also to provide a sufficient number of Serb-majority Partisan units to conquer the latter land, where the Partisan movement had been weak since late 1941 and where the anti-Communist forces predominated. Although Bosnia contributed substantially fewer Partisans to the movement as a whole than neighbouring Croatia, its contribution was nevertheless greater than that of any other Yugoslav land for the best part of the war: of 97 Partisan brigades in existence by the end of 1943 – shortly after the foundation of the new Yugoslavia – 38 were from Croatia, 23 from Bosnia-Herzegovina and 18 from Slovenia. At this time, the whole of eastern Yugoslavia (Vojvodina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia) was contributing only 18 Partisan brigades.⁹ It was Croatia and Bosnia – territories, for the most part, of the so-called 'Independent State of Croatia' (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska – NDH) – that together comprised the Partisan powerhouse, and of these two territories, Bosnia's location adjacent to Serbia made it the natural choice for the seat of Tito's command and the centre of his movement. After Belgrade was liberated in October 1944, the central organs of the embryonic Yugoslav federal state were moved there, but they had been forged in Bosnia. Jajce, where the new Yugoslav state was formally founded, had been the Bosnian medieval capital.

Revolutions are, to a very large extent, shaped by events at their epicentre. As Paris shaped the character of the French Revolution; as Petrograd shaped the character of the Russian Revolution; so it is reasonable to assume that Bosnia-Herzegovina must have shaped the character of the Yugoslav Revolution. True, Bosnia is a country rather than a city, yet its population of just over

2.4 million in 1941 was scarcely larger than Petrograd's in 1917. Unlike the French and Russian revolutionaries, Tito and his Supreme Staff and Central Committee had, of necessity, a peripatetic seat or capital, moving between different Bosnian towns from the end of 1941 until the middle of 1944; from Foča to Drvar via Bihać and Jajce. For an understanding of the Yugoslav Revolution, therefore, Bosnia is key. Yet for the NOP to establish a sufficiently firm base in Bosnia, it had to contend with the fact that Bosnia's population was nationally heterogeneous. Of a Bosnian population of 2,323,555 in 1931, 1,028,139 or 44.25% was Orthodox, mostly Serb; 718,079 or 30.9% was Muslim; 547,949 or 23.58% was Catholic, mostly Croat; and 29,388 or 1.27% belonged to other religious denominations, above all the Jewish.¹⁰ The Serbs were, initially, the Bosnian nationality that could most readily be mobilised in the Partisans, on account of the genocidal persecution to which they were subjected by the Ustasas – the Croat fascists who headed the NDH. Consequently, in the early stages of the Bosnian Partisan uprising, the Bosnian Partisans were essentially a Serb army at the level of the rank-and-file. Yet a Bosnian resistance movement could only be successful if it were to encompass at least part of the non-Serb majority in Bosnia as well – above all, the Muslims. This was particularly so, since in the Bosnian towns, the Muslims were easily the most significant element, comprising 50.43% of the Bosnian urban population in 1931 against 23.23% for the Catholics and 22.34% for the Orthodox.¹¹ To hold power in a country requires holding the main towns, and Bosnia's towns could not be held without a political base among the Muslim urban population; just as Bosnia was the key to power in Yugoslavia, so the Muslims were the key to power in Bosnia. But the Bosnian Muslim nation in 1941 was not polarised along class lines, and the mass of the Muslim population – predominantly peasants – looked to the Muslim elite for political leadership. This required the NOP to coopt members of the Muslim elite if it were to gain a solid foothold among the Muslim masses.

The story of how the Yugoslav Partisans won the support of part of the Bosnian Muslim population, and part of the Muslim elite, is therefore a crucial part of the story of how the Yugoslav Revolution triumphed. Yet it is a story that has been ignored in the more familiar English-language accounts of the Revolution, which are more likely to write off the key Bosnian Muslim element in orientalist terms. Milovan Đilas, referring to the Muslim population of Komaran in the Sanjak, claims that they had 'out of traditional religious intolerance, joined every invader of the Serbian lands.'¹² Fitzroy Maclean, in reference to the Ustasha genocide of the Serbs, describes the Bosnian Muslims as 'fanatical' and as having 'delighted at the opportunity of massacring Christians of whatever denomination.'¹³ Such crude stereotypes substitute for a genuine understanding of what went on in Yugoslavia during World War II. A major contribution to correcting the stereotypes about, and rectifying the deficit in our understanding of, Bosnia and its Muslims in World War II has been made recently by Emily Greble's meticulous 2011 study of Sarajevo under Ustasha rule, which brings previously unseen depth and nuance to the topic.¹⁴ Yet the NOP and the revolution feature only slightly in this work.

Although the historiography in English and in other non-Yugoslav languages concerning the Yugoslav Revolution is massively deficient, the same cannot be said for the historiography that arose in the former Yugoslavia itself, particularly among those writing in the language (or, some would say, languages) that was once called 'Serbo-Croat' and is now frequently referred to as 'BCS' ('Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian'). Indeed, several excellent monographs and very many solid but pedestrian monographs have been written about the Partisans in Bosnia, and more generally in Yugoslavia, both during and after the Communist era.¹⁵ The problem here, however, is that they

were generally written from within the Titoist paradigm, stressing the centrality of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia as the creative force in the People's Liberation Struggle. In this sense, new ground was broken by the 1998 study of Bosnia in World War II, subsequently translated into English as 'Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Second World War', written by the *doyen* of Titoist Bosnian historians of the revolution, himself a Partisan veteran, Professor Enver Redžić.¹⁶ Breaking with the bipolar Titoist model, whereby World War II in Bosnia (and in Yugoslavia as a whole) was a struggle of the Communist-led Partisans on the one side and everyone else on the other, Redžić presented a less Communist-centric picture, whereby the Partisans in Bosnia were merely one party in a five-sided struggle; the others being the Axis occupiers; the Ustashas; the Chetniks and the Muslim autonomists. Redžić's model more accurately represented the complexities of the struggle than the orthodox Titoist one. Yet Redžić's chapter on the side that won – the People's Liberation Movement – remained within the orthodox Titoist paradigm, since he still portrayed this movement essentially as top-down, homogenous and pristine. Redžić placed the People's Liberation Movement in its proper context, instead of the elevated place it had been given by orthodox Titoist historians. But he did not attempt to deconstruct the NOP itself, leaving the reasons for the NOP's triumph as opaque as they were in earlier works.

Furthermore, in continuing to present the conflict as one between rigidly distinct sides, Redžić's model remained deficient. The three principal domestic factions that competed with one another for the hearts and minds of the Bosnian Muslim population – the Ustashas, Muslim autonomists and People's Liberation Movement – were not rigidly distinct. The mass of ordinary Muslims and other Bosnians were not strongly committed to any of the sides, but sought only to survive the war; their loyalties shifted and fluctuated in line with the behaviour of the different sides toward the civilian population, the effectiveness of the sides' respective propaganda, the military fortunes of the sides' respective international patrons (Axis and Allies), the behaviour and policy of these patrons, and simple personal interest and opportunity. Many individuals kept feet in more than one camp, while single families could include supporters of all three. Many NDH officials and quisling soldiers collaborated with the NOP. Broad networks of personal connections cut across the divide between the opposing camps, acting as bridges by which groups of people could shift between the latter. A large part of the NOP's activity and reason for its ultimate success – obscured in the traditional historiography, with its stress on military actions – consisted in winning over sections of the civilian population, NDH officialdom and quisling soldiery – both NDH and Muslim-autonomist – through the use of propaganda and agitation. Revolutions succeed when pillars of the old order crumble and its adherents defect to the struggle for the new. The traditional historiography presents the Yugoslav Revolution essentially as the military conquest of power by one side in a civil war. Yet it was more than this; it was a genuine revolution of grass-roots activism, infiltration and defection. As in Petrograd in November 1917, it was the large-scale defection of the soldiers and garrisons of the old order to the revolution that made the latter much less bloody than it would otherwise have been.¹⁷

The present work is, firstly, a study of the relationship between the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the People's Liberation Movement. It seeks to explain how and why large sections of the Bosnian Muslim population came to support the NOP, and to trace the resulting dynamic. Of course, the story of the Bosnian Muslims in the NOP cannot be told in isolation from that of other Bosnians, and this book more generally seeks to describe and explain the revolution as it embraced Bosnia and all its peoples. It seeks to explain how the NOP emerged victorious in the war in Bosnia, seized power across the country and established a new People's Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a constituent member of the new Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia. This

involves deconstructing the myth of a pristine, homogenous, top-down Communist-led resistance movement, through an emphasis on events at the regional, local and grass-roots levels across Bosnia, and on the diverse and contradictory elements that encompassed this movement. Reference is made where necessary and relevant to events at the all-Yugoslav level, since events in Bosnia cannot be understood in isolation from the wider Yugoslav whole. Yet at the same time, events in Bosnia cannot be viewed simply as part and parcel of this wider whole; there was a specifically Bosnian revolutionary dynamic, which this work seeks to unravel.

Notes

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 11. Ibid., p. 8. ?
 12. Djilas, Wartime, p. 136. ?
 13. Maclean, Eastern Approaches, p. 265 ?
 14. Emily Greble, Sarajevo, 1941-1945: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Hitler's Europe, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2011. ?
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 17. See Rabinowitch, op. cit ?

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