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Croatia

Franjo Tuđman: A Political and Intellectual Biography

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

I am writing a political and intellectual biography of Franjo Tuđman, the late president of Croatia. I was interested in visiting Croatia and speaking with people who knew the former Croatian president. I was also interested in talking with scholars at the Hrvatski Institut za Povijest (Croatian Institute for History), the major Croatian institution for historical research and the publisher of *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* (*Journal of Contemporary History*), and the Institut Društvenih Znanosti Ivo Pilar (Institute of Social Sciences, Ivo Pilar), another research institution. My research was conducted in Croatia, primarily in Zagreb, from May 21 to June 25, 2005.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

A number of biographies have appeared in English on Slobodan Milošević, but none on Franjo Tuđman. To date, readers of English know a great deal more about what one scholar calls “the Serbian project” than they do about the internal politics and foreign policy of Croatia, and there is more in the English-language literature on British, American, and European foreign policy regarding the dissolution of Yugoslavia than on Croatian foreign policy. Even general surveys of Yugoslavia’s demise, like the influential work by Laura Silber and Allan Little, tend to focus on Serbia and Slobodan Milošević.

This study will therefore help to fill a major gap in the literature and provide an account of Yugoslavia’s breakup from a perspective which has generally been subsumed under that of Serbia, with Tuđman as something of a sorcerer’s apprentice to Milošević’s magus, the lesser of two Balkan evils. By focusing on Tuđman and putting him in context, this study will underscore how different the two men were and how Tuđman was shaped and limited by what he would have called “objective realities.”

Approach and Research Methodology

I went to Croatia primarily to conduct elite interviews to clarify points which had arisen in the course of researching and writing the preliminary draft of the biography. Given the brief period I was in Croatia, I focused on meeting and speaking with people, rather than working in archives.

During my five weeks in the country, I managed to speak with more than thirty individuals, giving me a sample large and varied enough to correct bias by cross-checking the answers by my respondents. My respondents included Martin Špegelj, who played a crucial role in creating the Croatian army; Slaven Letica, Tuđman’s first National Security Adviser; Mate Granić, Croatian Foreign Minister in 1994 and 1995; Zvonimir Čičak, one of Tuđman’s most persistent critics; Miroslav Tuđman, former head of the Croatian intelligence service; Anđelko Mijatović, who worked closely with the Croatian president for nine years; and a number of Croatian scholars, among them Ivo Banac, Ivan Čizmić, Jure Krišto, and Dušan Bilandžić.

Elite interviews involve several problems, including the objectivity of the respondents, the limited nature of their roles, the specific nature of their information, and selective memory. Although I had a list of prepared questions, our conversations tended to be open-ended. This avoided leading respondents or limiting their responses, and I found that if I let people talk freely, they

tended to answer questions which I would not have known to ask. Venues varied, from coffee shops to restaurants to private homes. I allowed those whom I was interviewing to choose a place to meet where they were most comfortable. Most conversations, particularly with colleagues, were conducted in English. I also conducted a number of interviews in Croatian. Because I am not a native speaker, I taped these interviews as a check on my notes. Given the brief time I was in the country and that some interviews lasted more than three hours, it was not possible to follow up in most cases. But I have begun to verify my notes and my transcripts of the taped interviews with those interviewed, and in many cases, people offered to continue our conversations via e-mail.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

A close reading of Tuđman's publications and my examination of his career prior to my trip suggested that he was not the cardboard Croatian nationalist portrayed in both the popular and the scholarly literature, but a complex individual whose thirty years in the communist party continued to influence the way he perceived the world after he became a champion of self-determination for small states and a proponent of democratic political and economic reforms during the late 1960s. My trip has confirmed these general conclusions, but speaking with Tuđman's colleagues, his political opponents, and Croatian scholars has also refined my approach to the late Croatian president, e.g., it is clearer why his supporters considered him a democrat (Croatia had the trappings of formal democracy) while his opponents depict him as an authoritarian leader (Croatia's institutions did not always function well).

There is no doubt that Tuđman was a complex and exceedingly ambitious individual whose scholarly work reflected his political views. But questions remain regarding his links to the Croatian diaspora, his evolution from a loyal Party member to a committed Croatian nationalist, the long-term effects on his personality and behavior of his years in the Army and the Communist Party, and the ways in which his personal beliefs and scholarly work shaped his political views and activity. In short, I am reconsidering my previous conclusions and looking for additional information to confirm or revise them.

It is clear that opinions regarding Tuđman are strongly held by his contemporaries, who tend to select data that support their points of view rather than seek to analyze the former Croatian president dispassionately. The two most recent biographies of Tuđman reflect this polarization—while Darko Hudelist seeks to debunk the HDZ leader, Zdravko Tomac is an advocate for both Tuđman and Croatia.

It is also clear from my conversations that the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia) has had a considerable impact on how Croats view Tuđman and their own country. In effect, the ICTY has "legalized" the historical process and deformed discussion of both Tuđman and Croatia during the 1990s, making it impossible to write or talk about Tuđman and Croatia without reference to the wording of the ICTY indictments and the evidence presented at The Hague.

At this point in my research, it seems that Tuđman's view of historical reality was an evolving synthesis, initially formed in the Communist Party and the Partisan movement, then refined during an era of decolonization and national liberation, and finally transformed during two decades of persecution and imprisonment. He was shaped as much by his reading of Marx, Lenin, and the "Croatian" Left, as he was by the writings of the Croatian nationalist Ante Starčević or the Croatian populist Stjepan Radić. His nationalism owed little or nothing to right-wing ideologues or fascist thinkers like Josip Frank or Ante Pavelić, but it was clearly shaped by events, such as Tito's attack on centralism at the VIII Party Congress in 1964 and the purge of those associated with the "Croatian Spring," including Tuđman, after 1971. Such preliminary assessments are not definitive, but they suggest that the Croatian leader was a complex personality who had a sophisticated world view, not a radical nationalist nor a neo-fascist.

Suggestions for Future Research Agenda

My intention has been to write a synthetic study, based on Tuđman's writings and published primary and secondary material in order to help inform the English-speaking public regarding Tudman and to suggest fruitful avenues of research to other scholars. My tasks now are to finish reading the published sources and to organize several linear feet of notes and xeroxes into a coherent historical narrative. The finished manuscript should contain further suggestions for research on both Tuđman and the creation of the contemporary Croatian state.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

From the perspective of a historian, I can offer the following tentative policy recommendations:

1. Franjo Tuđman was not Slobodan Milošević. To what extent the policy-making community understood this during the 1990s is not clear. Yet the two men, like their countries, are remarkably different. Because faulty policy appears to have been tied to a tendency to identify the Croatian with the Serbian leader, it would seem prudent in future to assess leaders on their own merits and to shape policy accordingly, rather than to focus on similarities and to lump leaders in catch-all categories.

2. During the early 1990s, American policy-makers appear to have assumed that nationalists are dangerous. But viewing Franjo Tuđman as a radical nationalist seeking to create a neo-fascist state, rather than as a moderate nationalist attempting to obtain the maximum autonomy for his country initially led the United States to support leaders in Belgrade rather than those in Zagreb and Ljubljana. It thus seems that the commitment of policy-makers to certain assumptions regarding the nature of nationalism limited their ability to manage the crisis in Yugoslavia.

3. Similarly, assumptions regarding the nature of the international system appear to have hampered the ability of policy-makers to prevent military conflict in Yugoslavia. Because they tended to agree that Yugoslavia's survival was essential to the stability of the international system, they condoned the use of military force to suppress the nationalist governments of Croatia and Slovenia in June 1991. But it is clear from a study of Tuđman and his government that the problems were essentially political and not amenable to a military solution. At best, intervention by the JNA only postponed the crisis.

4. Tuđman was the leader of a small state under extreme stress. But it is not clear that policy-makers understood this, nor that they grasped either the extent of the influence they exercised on him or the limits of their influence. While Tuđman sought to work with the international community, he did not react well to what he perceived as bullying. So while he accepted all peace proposals and worked closely with the United States in 1994 and 1995, he opted for a military solution in 1995, in part to avoid having to partition Croatia, which the peace plan then proffered by the West would effectively have done, and in part because during four years the UN had failed to fulfill its obligations under the original Vance Plan. Had policy-makers had a more realistic grasp of their influence, they might well have found it easier to work with Tuđman and his government, and had they understood the consequences of failing to live up to their obligations, in this case a failure by the UN that implicated the whole international community, it might have been possible to avoid military operations in 1995.

5. Tuđman was shaped by his past, and he was remarkably straightforward regarding his positions and policies. Yet few actually read him, and those who did appear to have viewed his writing through their own ideological lenses. Again, a more accurate and carefully constructed view of Tuđman might well have helped policy-makers to avoid misleading him and enabled them to work with him.

6. Finally, opinions regarding Tuđman are strongly held in Croatia. Yet most Croats, whether they approved of his policies or considered them damaging to Croatia, appear to want to consign Tuđman to history. Sanader's HDZ is a revamped party, and today's Croatia is a country seeking admission to the EU and anxious to cooperate with the international community. While it is useful to understand Tuđman as a historical figure for purposes of analysis, it would seem that policy-makers would want to encourage Croatia to move toward the future rather than force it to focus on its past.