

**Abstract: Ethnic War and the Legacy of Socialist Nationality Politics
in the Former Yugoslavia**

by Bodo Weber

The ethnic violence that occurred during the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia was explained by its protagonists to be the realization of the principle of nation state, a process that had long been ended in the West, but could not have been accomplished in South-East Europe until the end of communist rule. Contrary to this view, it is the purpose of the author of the proposed paper to show that ethnic conflicts in the Balkans have to be explained through the legacy of nationality politics of socialist Yugoslavia.

Nationalism and Ethnicity were part of the means by which the Yugoslav communists tried to organize and create a modern socialist society from above, based upon the experience of the chaos produced by ethnic violence during the World War II and the total failure of the inter-war Yugoslav state. Ethnic nationalism only achieved its full momentum in the 1960s as an auxiliary way of legitimizing communist rule at a time when the applied model of extensive modernisation fell into crisis. Even more important, it served as a means of legitimizing the authoritarian rule of the by then already largely decentralized party-state apparatus, persisting in spite of the proclaimed democratic principles of self-administrative socialism.

In my paper I will argue that the logic of ethnic conflict that extended the aims of physically separating imagined collectivities to the last corner of the Yugoslav territory follows exactly the line of this socialist link between decentralized authoritarian rule and ethnic nationalism.

Further more I will argue that ethnic violence has been a collective crime (in a sociological sense), by almost completely wiping out the demarcation line between legal and illegal action, between law and a state of lawlessness. This dynamic was further enhanced through the merger of (formerly socialist) army, police and state security structures with paramilitary forces and the criminal underground in general. I will try to show that these patterns of violence can only be understood against the background of an overall erosion of law and authority specific to the Yugoslav society in the period of socialist self-administration.

The paper will be based on an ongoing, large-scale empirical research on the Balkan wars, a Ph.D. project that covers Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia-Montenegro and analyzes all major aspects: pattern of ethnic violence, nationalist ideology, state/power structures and war economy. It is theory-driven research aimed at contributing to a social theory of post-socialist ethnic nationalism and of post-1989 ethnic conflicts in general. It is one of the first large-scale research projects on the post-Yugoslav conflicts based on primary sources, taking advantage of a large number of documents located at the archive of the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) in The Hague.

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