

What role did the youth popular culture in Yugoslavia play in the creation of a collective identity?

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Introduction

Yugoslavia was a federal country formed under the guiding principle of 'brotherhood and unity' used to unite the South Slavic people (Yugoslavia meaning South-Slavia in Serbo-Croatian) after years of occupation from both Austro-Hungarian Empire (northern parts of the Balkan) and the Ottoman Empire (entirety of the Balkan, with the biggest influence in the south-eastern parts). The idea sprung from the complete lack of independence and no ability to develop the culture of South Slavic peoples and was constructed to promote the unity of them by unifying them and growing together (Kunitz, 2004).

The states in the federal republic were Macedonia, Serbia (with the territory of Kosovo today), Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Slovenia. The official languages were Serbo-Croatian (including the Montenegrin and Bosnian dialects), Slovenian and Macedonian. In each of the states, all languages were present in media forms such as news and TV streams, accompanied by school courses in language to enable the flowing communication among different ethnicities.

A further important aspect is the classification of Yugoslavia as a leading state in the Non-Aligned Movement, even sometimes referring to the state as a 'third global power' in Tito's speeches and statements. Due to this, the country's focus was on development as independent as possible from both Soviet and US influence (Čavoski & Životić, 2016, p.79-97). However, considering that it was a socialist state, it was a much less oppressive form of socialism in comparison to its other Eastern European counterparts (Ivešić, 2020).

The relevancy of the topic of creation of the collective identity and the factors that impacted it is justified through the wide range of interpretations of the events in Yugoslavia in the countries today, varying from complete romanticization of the past, especially Josip Broz Tito as a leader of the country (1953-1980) to despising the propagating aspect and focusing on its failures rather than successes. This could be examined through the difference in people expressing yugonostalgia in the different states, with the contrast of 70,9% in Serbia to 5% in Kosovo (Milekic, 2017). However, in the countries that took part in the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001 in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo) the attitude is much different, with a focal point on the damage of the wars.

Rather than focusing on the geopolitical aspects of the breakup and formation of the country, this essay will analyse the formation, maintenance and eventual neglect of the notion of collective identity among Yugoslavs and examine the factors that impacted and led these processes.

An undeniable fact is that collective identity presented as 'brotherhood and unity' was the core of the Yugoslav identity (Perica, 2002). Even though people had the right to ethnic

self-identification, a portion chose to identify simply as Yugoslav, which was to a different extent in different states. For example, the majority of Bosniak people identified as such and did not want to be put in the same category as Serbs and Croats, however in 1981 Bosnia still had one of the highest percentages of people identifying as Yugoslav with 7.9%, in comparison to Macedonia and Kosovo, both less than 1% (Federal Statistical Institute of Yugoslavia, 1981). This could be attributed to the bigger ethnic diversity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, leading to more ethnic conflicts and rising nationalism, which led to attempts of unification by some through adopting this identity. On the other hand, in more ethnically homogeneous environments people felt more comfortable identifying with the majority of their own nationality (Sekulic & Massey & Hodson, 1994).

Popular culture, especially for the so-called 'transition generation', referring to the youth in Yugoslavia, played a crucial role in the development of this collective identity. To examine all the aspects, the sources in this essay include personal interviews, music, news articles, advertisements, academic articles written by historians, memoirs and documents from Yugoslavia. Through the use of such a variety of sources, aspects such as student organizations, media representation, informal and formal communication, curricular and extracurricular activities of youth will be analyzed and different interpretations of their status as propaganda will be addressed.

The time period of Yugoslavia analysed will be the duration of Tito's rule (1953-1980) and the years following his death, since he played a key role in the establishment of a Yugoslav identity. Even in today's world, most of the impact it had on the lives of the people came from the time of Tito, whose priority was the youth cultural identity. There are conflicting historical perspectives on the 'informal' propaganda, usually by Western versus Eastern historians. Factors necessary to bear in mind are the cultural lens and paradigm, since the Yugoslav historians provide a softer, more open approach, rather than simple classification of all actions as propaganda and authoritarianism, which will be analysed further in the essay.

The essay draws on the spectrum on both primary and secondary sources to evaluate the impact of youth and media produced propaganda, as an often overlooked aspect of indoctrination on the creation of a collective identity. Rather, it draws upon the argument that the indoctrination of people through the educational system, shifted the social norms to a more socialist approach and even extracurricular activities led to a self-generating form of propaganda through the production of music, films and other forms of entertainment, which was not necessarily directly politically motivated. The aforementioned points will be discussed in this essay through the research question: **What role did the youth popular culture in Yugoslavia play in the creation of collective identity?**

1: Indoctrination through the educational system

From an early age, a cult of personality towards Tito and love for the country was promoted in schools, ranging from set social norms of behaviour to formal curricular lessons. Due to the fact that most of the formal research focuses on the basis of the educational system, the way it was executed is mostly overlooked. A conversation with Nadica Tanevska Janeva, a sociology professor based in Skopje, addressed all of these issues. Janeva is a typical example of the 'transition generation' that grew up in Yugoslavia, when it was considered at its peak. "Every classroom had to have a picture of Tito. The songs we learnt in the first grade were all dedicated to the leader, children of military officers had a significantly higher social status, even though it was supposed to be on the principle of equality and unity." (N. Janeva, personal communication, 23 August, 2021). Most of the arts and literature at the schools was embedded with patriotic motifs, such as a series of poems written from the point of view of youth to Tito, expressing love for the country, unity for the people and utmost respect for the leader. Furthermore, the subject selection was heavily influenced by the political system. All students were taught Serbo-Croatian (yet not Macedonian and Slovenian in the other republics), there was a huge focus on physical education and fitness of young people. Social science was called Marxism and taught students about the system in the country, yet not the wide range of political systems in the world. Another subject was military defense, where students used fake grenades and weapons to learn about defense of the country in the name of patriotism (N.T. Janeva, personal communication, 2021). This leads to a situation where from a very early age (7 years old to 15 years old) children were indoctrinated into the idea of patriotism and identification with Yugoslavia. As these children became youth, more and more of the media and entertainment these generations produced resulted in people-to-people propaganda and reinforcement of that collective identity by people themselves, rather than traditional forms of political propaganda such as political posters and speeches.

The education system was based on a uniformed principle that all students are the same, however there were very big discrepancies among urban and rural schools and among the different republics. For example, the illiteracy rate in Slovenia was 1.8%, whereas in Bosnia and Herzegovina 32.5%, which is a significant difference (Farmerie, 1971).

Education played a crucial role in the character and attitude development and the new generations were strongly influenced by statements such as "Let us protect the brotherhood and unity like the pupil of our eye" (Tito, n.d.) . However, education promoted the ideas of unity, yet did not equip students with the tool needed to maintain such an ethnic diversity in the country, especially in areas that were damaged by the war and had previous history of ethnic conflicts, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sotiropoulou, 2004). A further point of

criticism of the education system is that it failed to recognize the diversity of historical experience in the federation and attempted to equalize all of the history of the Slavic parts of Balkan as a common shared history. By failing to acknowledge this, nationalism was rising among the older generations, while young people were in the midst of rising Yugoslav patriotism and local nationalist movement. This was especially prominent in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and all Muslim ethnic minorities, since they felt excluded from the South Slavic narrative that was promoted (Sekulic et al., 1994).

Overall, the incorporation of patriotic motifs in the educational system through literature, social science, and behavior such as singing the national anthem and portraits of Tito in the classrooms created a strong basis for the creation of the collective identity in the younger generations.

2: Propaganda through policies

Apart from the educational system and teaching values to children who had no previous historical or cultural background in their respective republics, a lot of the perception of the country came from policies that 'forced' people to feel united.

Tourist propaganda perfectly represents the cohesion of political interest, socialist ideals and sense of unity. One of the most famous advertisements was "Those who have money bathe in the sea, and those who do not have money bathe at home in the washbowl." (Krejic & Palic, 2020). This promotional campaign perfectly encapsulates the socialist climate: tourism was not reserved for the elites, in fact it was made available even for the average worker. The idea behind is that the division among the elite and workers should be eliminated: no Yugoslav citizen would be a victim of inequality. This did not only serve as a tool to ensure popular support through expressing care and willingness to fight for a better life for all of the people, but further enabled them to engage in opportunities that were previously considered a luxury. Furthermore, since a lot of the coastal tourist areas were in Slovenia, Croatia and Montenegro, it promoted the local destinations, contributing to the economy and setting the tone that the state itself is rich with opportunities and self-reliant in all aspects of life, even tourism. Most children of military officers and state workers had privileges, such as free camps and vacations around the country.

Another aspect of collective identity creation was the deliberate assimilation even in terms of military service. Young men were obligated to do one year of military service, which most of the time was not in their native republic (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 1990). By intentionally mixing the militaries, a sense of fighting for Yugoslavia, rather than your own republic was created (J. Belamaric, personal communication, 13 September, 2021). However, power dynamics among the republic was a real occurring issue

in the political system. Most politicians invested disproportionately in their native republic, rather than equally in all the other member states (Rusinow, 1985). This led to a lot of frustration in the rural areas and less of an identification with the federation, interfering with the conflicting representations of collectivism and equality.

Public events and holidays were another form of conveying political messages. All forms of celebration were with a centrifugal focus on Tito, as a symbol for the unity of the state and the leader of all. Public rallies and marches were another popular form of celebration, with children involved as participants in shows, people gathering in public areas to wave to the President, singing the national anthem and other patriotic songs. A form of greeting for all was 'drugovi i drugarice', which could loosely be translated as 'comrades' (J. Belamaric, personal communication, 13 September, 2021). All people, especially in workplaces and institutions, referred to each other by this phrase, encompassing the socialist Tito ideals in everyday forms of communication. Even though the presence of ethnic conflicts and disagreement with the government are undeniable, it is a fact that a lot of people truly believed in his vision and had a lot of respect for his deeds in Yugoslavia.

This is one of the reasons why representations of propaganda in Yugoslavia among Western and Eastern historians differ so greatly. Western historians perceive Yugoslav propaganda as a much stricter authoritarian occurrence, whereas local historians understand that even though the system was not democratic, a lot of people did love Tito and Yugoslavia and agreed with the propaganda spread.

3: Students and youth organizations

Among student and youth organizations, patriotism was a root for all the wishes for change. Members were encouraged to improve for the benefit of its entirety and a lot of their patterns of behaviour and attitudes were strongly connotated with socialist federalism. Tito's pioneers was a youth organization which is a typical example. All Yugoslav children were in the clubs, where they would have a lot of physical activities and sports, singing songs, meeting new friends from the other republics and following an organizational structure identical to the one that was followed in the War of Liberation, inherently linking it to political agenda (Georgeoff, 1964). Even though membership in the Association of Pioneers of Tito was voluntary, it played a crucial role in fun, extracurricular, and companionship activities.

By establishing such a set structure and having an award-system for the best pioneer by sending them to special camps called Sutjeska, named after the river Sutjeska where the War on Liberation happened. From a young age, even in a more informal way such as through these organizations, youth was trained into the belief that the past efforts of the Partisans are to be honoured and the love for the country is to be maintained and cherished.

However, there are different perceptions of these camps and clubs. Georgoff states that his interpretation, based on personal experience, is that these activities were fun, engaging and created a strong bond among young people from different backgrounds. However, according to him, Western researchers tend to present them as camps with extremely strict discipline and lots of control over the behavioral patterns.

By calling them Tito's pioneers, an extracurricular activity went from being a fun activity for children to heavily influencing them and creating a cult of personality to the leader. Even the uniforms for the young pioneers consisted of a blue hat with a red star called Titovka. They would also participate in *Dan omladine* (The Relay of Youth) was celebrated on the 25 May, Tito's birthday as a pledge of honour. Tito's policies were youth-focused, accentuating the role of young people into the system, which led to a lot of popular support among those generations. Children would sing songs like "Tito je nase sunce" (Tito is our sun) and perform for the other citizens. By engaging youth directly in this process, they were taken into the politicization of all celebrations.

Day of Youth as one of the most important holidays in Yugoslavia played a significant role in the collective identity. It was an event everyone would attend. It included encouraging Tito's speeches that people would listen to. One of the most important Day of Youth celebrations was in 1984, when a TV announcement stated "Rock and roll will keep us together". Even though it might sound like a meaningless statement at first, it captures the climate of 1984 after Tito's death when ethnic conflict and nationalism started arising, so youth culture was seen as a way to the salvation of the Yugoslav identity and republic (Petrov, 2015). It is a symbolic way of representing the social situation and issues through a scene which was extremely popular among youth and gave them an opportunity to find comfort in the thought that 'brotherhood and unity' was still preservable. The last one was held in 1988, 8 years after the death of Tito, when signs of the collapse of the state already started emerging.

4: Popular culture as an influence on youth

Popular culture was a creation of youth and the strongest form of youth culture in Yugoslavia. It ranged from sporting events to musical concerts, television streams and poetry. The notion of the Yugoslav identity was intertwined in all of these forms of expression and it was a subliminal way of expressing collectivisation (Petrov, 2015). No emotion or occurrence was left unconnected to the Yugoslav identity and brotherhood. Often these forms of media are not seen as propaganda, since they are not the conventional political posters and speeches, yet they play a crucial role in normalising patriotism and the identification of the individual with the wider society.

4.1 Music

Influential public figures such as Lepa Brena, Zdravko Colic and a lot of bands with a massive influence on their young fan base included the Yugoslav narrative in lyrics in their songs. For example, Lepa Brena, one of the most popular folk singers at the time, released a song called “Ja sam Jugoslovenka” (I am a Yugoslav). In the chorus, lyrics such as

“My eyes are Adriatic sea
my hair is Pannonian wheat
wistful is my Slavic soul
I'm Yugoslavian”

are used to connect every humanly thing, even female beauty and elegance, to the Yugoslav landscapes and patriotism. When huge masses of people sing these lyrics, intense nationalism and patriotism become so normalized, that the national identity becomes a crucial part of everyday life and communication between people. Another example of this is the song “Igra rokenrol cela Jugoslavija” (Yugoslavia is dancing rock'n'roll) by the band Elektični orgazam, which was released in 1988, just a few years before the total collapse of the federation. By enforcing the collectivity and unity in a symbolic way such as dancing to rock, adolescents were able to associate themselves with the collective and relate to the experience of unity, even when it was on the brink of falling apart and it was the year when Slovenia started efforts for independence.

The role of music in popular culture might not have had direct political value, however it did strongly influence the perception of the people of the events that were taking place. Youth was more likely to engage with popular culture, rather than the political system, giving it importance in the mindset of the future generations. To this day, ex-Yugoslav music is heavily romanticized, celebrated and a common favourite of both generations who lived in the country and generations born afterwards in their independent nations.

4.2 Events

Furthermore, events such as the Olympics and Eurovision were occasions when the patriotism was once again confirmed through the celebration of wins, especially the win of Eurovision in 1989. These types of events, especially during the rule of Tito and after his death, were a central focus of being proud of the successes of the country. Due to the previous politically weak situation of the respective republics, these little victories of Yugoslavia were the core of pride and feeling of importance on the world stage. The Eurovision win in 1989 was the last moment of united celebration, just 4 years before the

total collapse. For young people, this was a way to hold onto the sense of brotherhood and unity amidst all conflict and struggle.

4.3 Film

Partisan film was the name of the sub-genre of movies that emerged in Yugoslavia. These films were the most produced and enjoyed by the audience and their motifs were portraying Yugoslavia as the victor in the Second World War and antagonizing the Axis forces. The main characters would always be Partisans and the setting would portray partisanship as glory and honour and a communist state as a war-free future (Horton, 1987).

Films such as "Walter defends Sarajevo", "The Battle of Sutjeska" and "Battle of Neretva" had real world historical events as a basis, yet were perceived as a form of entertainment. The main elements of the partisan movies were focused on the partisan struggle through major operations and battle, with a set communist interpretation of them, demonization of Germans, foreign characters as observants with the symbolic message "There it is, the world acknowledges us as we are" (Pavičić, 2009).

Pavičić suggests that the perception of these films as entertainment, rather than propaganda and their popularity in everyday life led to one-sided representation of historical issues and a lot of manipulation through the use of communist ideologies.

People would not only watch these films, but enjoy them and quote them, not being aware of any deeper historical context or perspectives than what was provided. The Yugoslav film industry was completely based on Partizan movies (Pavičić, 2009), which shows how deeply the state ideals had penetrated into all forms of entertainment and media.

As a summary of the previous points, looking at primary sources such as the song lyrics and key celebratory events suggest the role of popular culture in the mindset of the youth. The political propaganda was taking different forms and changing due to political conditions, republics were having rises of nationalism and occasional separatist movements throughout the years. However, for the generations born in this wave of confusion and instability in terms of ethnic determination, the collective identity expressed through these forms of media was a safety net. It was much easier to dance to a rock song with other young people and momentarily disregard the deep socio-political issues emerging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there were a lot of factors contributing to the creation of collective identity in Yugoslavia to different extents. The key element in evaluating their effectiveness was the youth factor, since youth was the main target and the one with least past experience in their

separate republics. The indoctrination through the education system was a set base for all the other ways in which collectivity was created. When the values were so deeply engraved from a young age, patriotism and nationalism for Yugoslavia became not only normalized, but strongly encouraged by both people in the nation and institutionally. Through the curriculum subject choices, bias in the topics learnt, accepted behavioral patterns and paradigm that was pushed onto children in the age of mandatory school, the mindset was initially established, which can be interpreted as a prerequisite for the other shapes of collectivisation which appeared later.

Governmental propaganda such as this and their involvement in the student and youth organizations was perhaps not the most powerful one of all, however a necessary foundation for the others that were to follow. Consequently, after the initial setting of the mindset in the school system so early, propaganda through policies became unnoticed by majorities. People were unaware that this was even considered propaganda and the cult of personality towards Tito as a figure in the country was interpreted as patriotism and good conduct of a citizen. As presented in the section, propaganda through policies ranged from mandatory military service to more subliminal forms such as tourist propaganda as a way to ensure the socialist values of the state. As a result of this, some older generations felt dissatisfied, however for their young counterparts it was the only 'normal' they were used to.

As the most effective one in terms of creating a collective identity, the most informal, naturally emerging one was the propaganda through popular media. Even though it was not government orchestrated or managed, it was the most accessible form for people to absorb. The reasons why it emerged in the first place are deeply intertwined with the governmental one, but its later forms, especially during the rule of Tito and after his death, was a genuine way of artists, and more importantly - people, showing their pride, patriotism and sense of belonging in all realms of art. Music lyrics, celebrations, sports events and films were what truly brought the principle of 'brotherhood and unity' to life (J. Belamaric, personal communication, 13 September, 2021). Every ex-Yugoslav that mourns over the collapse of the country does not think of the mandatory military service or the classroom regulation, but their memories of pioneer camps, dance events, musical concerts and feeling of unity. These memories might be influenced through the romanticized lens of youth, but also through the idea of a country that was once strong and influential and made them proud.

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