Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia was a country in Europe from 1918 to 2003. Yugoslavia lay on the Balkan Peninsula. The country brought together the various ethnic groups of the region under one government. After World War II (1939-1945), Yugoslavia became a Communist country.

In the early 1990’s, fighting between ethnic groups and the collapse of Communism split Yugoslavia into several smaller countries. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia each declared independence. The two remaining parts, Montenegro and Serbia, formed a new Yugoslavia. In 2003, the country revised its constitution and changed its name to Serbia and Montenegro. Serbia and Montenegro separated into independent countries in 2006. In 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia.

Land of the South Slavs. Groups of Slavs began to move into the Balkans in the A.D. 500’s. They migrated from what are now southern Poland and Russia. They became known as South Slavs. Each Slavic group formed its own independent state. For example, the Croats established Croatia. The Serbs founded Serbia.

By the mid-1400’s, foreign powers controlled nearly all the lands of the South Slavs. In the 1800’s, Austria-Hungary began ruling Croatia and Slovenia. In 1878, after the Ottoman Empire ended, Serbia gained independence. Bosnia-Herzegovina came under control of Austria-Hungary. During the 1800’s and early 1900’s, a movement to unite the South Slavs gained strength.

On June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina’s capital. Princip was a Serb from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Austria-Hungary accused Serbia of planning the killing. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, which marked the start of World War I. Austria-Hungary was defeated in 1918. The South Slavs were then free to form their own state.

A new country called the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes formed in 1918. It consisted of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Dalmatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. King Peter I of Serbia became king. Peter died in 1921. His son became King Alexander I.

Problems soon developed. The Slovenes and Croats believed the Serbs had too much power. They demanded greater control over their local affairs. It also proved difficult to unite the kingdom’s many ethnic groups.

The country’s 1921 Constitution created a constitutional monarchy. But in 1929, King Alexander abolished the Constitution and began to rule as a dictator. He named the country Yugoslavia. Alexander tried to unite the different nationalities by enforcing the use of one
language, Serbo-Croatian. He created new political divisions that ignored the ethnic groups' historical borders. Alexander's actions worsened relations between the groups. He was assassinated in 1934 by a Macedonian from Bulgaria who was supported by Croatian revolutionaries.

Alexander's 11-year-old son, King Peter II, was too young to rule. Alexander's cousin, Prince Paul, ruled in the boy's place. Under Paul, an agreement was made to establish an autonomous (self-governing) Croatia. But not all Serbs accepted the arrangement.

**World War II** began in 1939. The war was a struggle between the Axis powers, led by Germany and Italy, and the Allies, which included the United Kingdom and France. Yugoslavia was unprepared for war. Its government tried to remain neutral. Under pressure from Germany, the Yugoslav government joined the Axis on March 25, 1941. But the Yugoslav army rebelled. The army overthrew Paul's government. Peter, then 17 years old, took the throne. On April 6, Germany invaded Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav army surrendered 11 days later. Peter fled to London and formed a government-in-exile.

German and other Axis troops occupied Yugoslavia. Croatia was proclaimed an independent state. But it was controlled by the Axis. Croatia's leader, Ante Pavelic, ordered the killing of many Jews, Roma (sometimes called Gypsies), and Serbs. A resistance movement against Axis occupation spread among the Yugoslav peoples. Some of them joined the Partisans, a group led by Josip Broz Tito and the Communist Party (see Tito, Josip Broz). Other Yugoslavs joined the Chetniks, a group headed by Draza Mihajlovic. The Partisans wanted to form a Communist government. The Chetniks supported the government of King Peter.

The two resistance groups fought each other, as well as the occupation forces. At first, the Allies provided the Chetniks with weapons and supplies. But they switched their support to the Partisans in 1943 because Tito's forces were more effective against the Axis.

**Communist rule.** The Partisans gained the support of the Yugoslav peoples. The Communists set up a temporary government in Jajce (now in Bosnia-Herzegovina) in November 1943. Aided by Allied troops, the Partisans freed Belgrade from occupation in 1944. The Communists then began to govern from the capital. By the time World War II ended in Europe in May 1945, Tito and the Communists controlled Yugoslavia.

On Nov. 29, 1945, Yugoslavia became a republic. It was called the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. The monarchy was abolished. King Peter never returned to Yugoslavia. The 1946 Constitution organized Yugoslavia as a federal state. That meant that each republic largely controlled its own affairs. The six republics were Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Kosovo and Vojvodina became autonomous regions (later autonomous provinces) of Serbia.

Only one political party, the Communist Party, was permitted. The government took control of farms, factories, and other businesses. The Communists began changing Yugoslavia from an agricultural country into an industrial one. Opponents of the Communist government were either imprisoned or exiled. Mihajlovic was executed in 1946. The Roman Catholic
archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, resisted the Communist take-over. He was imprisoned on false charges of having aided Germany and Italy during World War II.

Yugoslavia was a close Soviet ally. But Tito refused to let the Soviet Union control the country. In 1948, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin broke off relations with Yugoslavia. The Cominform, an organization of Communist parties from various countries, expelled Yugoslavia's party and withdrew all aid. Yugoslavia turned to the United States and other Western countries for help. In 1951, the United States began providing Yugoslavia with economic aid. Later, the United States also granted military assistance.

After the split with the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia began to develop its own style of Communist government. In 1955, two years after Stalin's death, Soviet and Yugoslav leaders reopened relations. But Tito refused to take sides in the Cold War, a political rivalry between Communist countries and Western democracies. Instead, he became a leading spokesman for uncommitted countries.

In 1971, a 23-member council called the Presidency was established to head the Yugoslav government. A new constitution in 1974 reduced the Presidency to 9 members. Tito remained the country's top leader as head of the council until he died in 1980. Then, the eight members of the Presidency, one from each republic and province, took turns serving one-year terms as head of the council. Until 1989, the leader of Yugoslavia's Communist Party also held a seat on the council but did not take a turn as head of the Presidency.

**Political changes and ethnic tensions.** The Yugoslav economy started to decline in the late 1970's. The country began to experience severe inflation and other economic problems. An economic gap grew between the country's developed republics, such as Croatia and Slovenia, and its less developed republics, such as Macedonia and Montenegro.

In the late 1980's, Communism was losing its grip on power across Eastern Europe. Many people in Yugoslavia called for a multiparty political system. In January 1990, Yugoslavia's Communist Party voted to end its monopoly on power in the country. Each of Yugoslavia's republics held multiparty elections in 1990. Non-Communist parties won a majority of seats in the parliaments of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia. In Serbia and Montenegro, the Communist parties, now known as Socialist parties, won majorities.

For years, tension had existed between Yugoslavia's ethnic groups. Tensions were especially bad between Serbs and Croats and between Serbs and ethnic Albanians. In the 1960's, some Croats and Slovenes began to call for independence. Their demands grew in the 1980's. Serbia had the most influence in the national government. Croatia and Slovenia charged that Serbia sought to control the other republics. Demands for independence also increased among ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

**The breakup of Yugoslavia.** In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic, a supporter of Serbian unity and of expanding Serbian borders, became Serbia's president. Under him, Serbia stripped Kosovo and Vojvodina of autonomy. In 1990, Serbia dissolved Kosovo's government. See
Milosevic, Slobodan.

In May 1991, Serbia blocked the election of a Croat scheduled to become head of the Presidency under the system of annual rotation. Partly as a result, Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence in late June. Fighting then broke out between ethnic Serbs in Croatia and the Croat militia. In September 1991, Macedonia declared its independence. In January 1992, a cease-fire between Serbian and Croatian forces ended most fighting. But Serbian forces still held some Croatian land.

In March 1992, a majority of Bosniaks (sometimes called Bosnian Muslims) and ethnic Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina voted for independence from Yugoslavia in a referendum (direct vote). Ethnic Serbs boycotted the referendum. Fighting then broke out between Serbs who claimed part of the republic and Bosniaks and Croats. Serbs gained control of about two-thirds of the republic.

In April 1992, Serbia and Montenegro formed a new Yugoslavia. In late 1995, the Croatian government and the leaders of the Croatian Serbs made peace. They agreed to a plan that would gradually reunite land still held by Croatian Serbs with the rest of Croatia. Also in late 1995, representatives of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia signed a peace plan for Bosnia. The plan called for dividing Bosnia into two parts. One part would be ruled by a Bosniak-Croat federation and the other by Bosnian Serbs.

Kosovo crisis. In 1997, Milosevic ended his second term as Serbia's president. Yugoslavia's parliament then elected him president of Yugoslavia. Some members boycotted the vote.

In 1998, Serbian police attacked villages in the province of Kosovo, killing dozens of people and burning many homes. Milosevic said the police attack was a crackdown on the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army, which demanded independence for the province. Fighting began between the Serbian and rebel forces. Serbian forces destroyed villages in the province and drove many of Kosovo's Albanians from their homes.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sponsored peace talks in early 1999. But Serbian delegates rejected the peace plan. In March, NATO began air strikes against military targets in Yugoslavia to force the government to accept the peace plan. But Serb attacks continued. Hundreds of thousands of people fled Kosovo. In June, Serbian military commanders agreed to withdraw forces from Kosovo. NATO stopped the bombing and sent an international peacekeeping force to Kosovo. Refugees returned to Kosovo. But tensions ran high between Serbs and Albanians in the province.

The end of Yugoslavia. As opposition to Milosevic's rule grew, the government seized or interfered with opposition newspapers and broadcasters. Protesters met stiff resistance from police forces. A series of assassinations and attempted assassinations targeted mainly foes of Milosevic.

In a presidential election in 2000, Vojislav Kostunica, leader of the Democratic Opposition party, won the majority of the votes (see Kostunica, Vojislav). Milosevic and his allies claimed
that Kostunica had not won by a large enough majority and that a run-off election was necessary. The opposition claimed victory. Protesters demanding Milosevic’s resignation filled the streets of many of Serbia’s major cities. Police forces were overwhelmed by the size of the protests. Milosevic was ousted from power.

In 2002, the leaders of Montenegro, Serbia, and Yugoslavia planned to create a new constitution for Yugoslavia and to rename the country Serbia and Montenegro. The plans sought to address the concerns of Montenegro’s independence movement, which demanded more self-rule for their republic. Early in 2003, the parliaments of each province and of Yugoslavia approved the new constitution. Yugoslavia officially became Serbia and Montenegro. But that country later ceased to exist. Montenegro declared independence in 2006, after a referendum in which its citizens voted to separate from Serbia. Serbia then declared its own independence.

In the 2000’s, most of Kosovo’s Albanians demanded independence for the region. Serbia offered to grant Kosovo more self-government. International delegates failed to negotiate a settlement between Serbia and Kosovo. Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, without Serbia’s recognition. Member nations of the European Union and the United Nations were divided over accepting Kosovo’s independence.

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