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Every assassination led into a circle of violence

An interview with Christian Axboe Nielsen on his research and forthcoming book on the Yugoslav state security service's "illegal operations"

Christian Axboe Nielsen is an associate professor of history and human security at Aarhus University in Denmark, where he regularly lectures on the history of South Eastern Europe and other topics. He received his Ph.D. from the Columbia University in New York with his thesis on King Aleksandar's dictatorship in Yugoslavia, which was published as a book by University of Toronto Press in 2014. Besides his academic career, he worked as an analyst and external consultant for the Office of the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague and witnessed at five trials including the trial of Radovan Karadžić. Currently he is conducting research on the state security and intelligence services of socialist Yugoslavia. His most recent scholarly work was also put at the service of justice, as he testified at the Bavarian Provincial High Court during the trial of former officers of the Yugoslav secret service accused of organizing the murder of a political emigrant on what was then West German territory. The activity of Yugoslav state security (UDBA, SDB) was a topic of Professor Nielsen's presentation at the Prague conference on the 100th anniversary of Cheka in November 2017. His book *Yugoslavia and Political Assassinations. The History and Legacy of Tito's Campaign Against the Émigrés* (Bloomsbury/Tauris) on violent operations of Yugoslav secret service against political émigrés is scheduled for publication in November 2020. We are pleased to have the opportunity to discuss with Professor Nielsen his most recent research and some of his findings. The interview was conducted under the extraordinary conditions of anti-Covid measures via e-mail correspondence in June 2020.

Professor Nielsen, in your previous research you have dealt with the interwar period of Yugoslav history, the dictatorship of King Aleksandar in 1929–1934 in particular. This authoritarian regime is renowned for using harsh repressive measures against its political opponents. Can we find any continuity in the nature and extent of state sponsored political violence in this period with the era after 1945?

In my book on King Aleksandar's dictatorship¹, I argued that it was an authoritarian regime that possessed totalitarian ambitions but had neither the tools nor the com-

1 NIELSEN, Christian Axboe: *Making Yugoslavs: Identity in King Aleksandar's Yugoslavia*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2014.

petence to implement its plans fully in a state that was still overwhelmingly agrarian and relatively impoverished. But we start to see certain continuities that would be shared with various fascist regimes during the Second World War as well as with the Stalinist phase (roughly 1945–1953) in socialist Yugoslavia. In particular, the use of policing as a way not just of repressing opposition, but also of monitoring active yet nonconsensual support for the regime. There had of course earlier been police action taken against those who opposed various regimes in this geographical area, particularly if the opposition took on violent forms. After January 1929, the regime was much more willing to use coercion and force to obtain active compliance from citizens. In other words, not being against the regime was no longer sufficient; the citizen had to actively support the regime. It was now a case of “if you are not actively with us, you are against us”, whereas earlier it had been “if you are not actively against us, we will assume that you are with us”. The use of police surveillance, however inadequate at times, to implement this new modality, was a real innovation. The regime also tried, often with very mixed results, to implement other grand schemes such as the control of the mass media, changing the very maps of the country, and using violence against opponents. The irony when examining continuities is of course that very many of the victims of interwar political oppression, including during the dictatorship, were members of the then illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In fact, even as the communists after 1945 implemented a much more efficient system of political oppression against their opponents, we can see that some of the top leaders who had themselves experienced police oppression during interwar Yugoslavia (and during the Second World War) were in principle keen to avoid replicating the “bourgeois fascist oppression” of earlier regimes.

The position of Tito’s Yugoslavia among the countries ruled by the communist parties was specific in many aspects. The purpose of the Yugoslav State Security Service² was to protect the constitution and the ideological power monopoly of the communist party on the one side, but at the same time to defend the state’s integrity against separatist tendencies and the ethnic peace against chauvinist movements on the other. How has the UDBA defined its enemies? Where do you see its specifics in comparison with the state security services of the Soviet bloc countries?

Certainly, during the first two decades of socialist Yugoslavia, I believe that there were a lot more commonalities than differences between the Yugoslav State Security Service and other communist state security services. All of them imitated the Soviet model in the early years, and all of them originally used Stalinist strategies, tactics

2 Established in 1944 as OZNA (Odeljenje za zaštitu naroda – Department of People’s protection), after the war divided into the military KOS (Kontraobaveštajna služba – Counter intelligence service) and civil UDBA (Uprava državne bezbednosti – State security administration), which was reorganised in 1966 into the SDB/SDS (Služba državne bezbednosti/Služba državne sigurnosti – State security service), but still informally called UDBA.

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and methods. This means that the definition of enemies was extremely broad, and that anything less than unbridled support for the regime could be enough to earn the attention of the Yugoslav State Security Service. Of course, the major difference was the Tito-Stalin split, but even then the regime essentially used Stalinist methods of oppression against Stalinists. A good example of how low the threshold for activating oppression during this period was comes from several cases of teenage boys who ended up suffering brutal incarceration on the notorious prison island Goli Otok merely because they had told a few jokes about Tito. Certainly, during the period from 1948 until Stalin's death, the Yugoslav party-state viewed pro-Stalin communists, the so-called "ibeovci", as the greatest danger. My research has shown that this fear persisted even until Stalin's death, though other categories of enemies grew comparatively in importance after 1953.

I would say that perhaps the major distinction of Yugoslavia's State Security Service compared to other East European security services after the Second World War was the nationalities question. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia pledged to rule in the name of "brotherhood and unity", and particularly after the fratricidal mass atrocities of the Second World War, restoring some semblance of interethnic coexistence was a very demanding task. So the already long list of potential "enemies of the state" in Yugoslavia also included nationalists or "chauvinists" of all kinds.

Despite the fact that a limited liberalization was introduced in Yugoslavia as a consequence of the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, the manifestations of liberal democratic orientation (demands of civil liberties, human rights or democratization of the system) were persecuted until the very end of the socialist period. However, the extreme nationalists were the regime's most typical adversaries. How has this fact shaped Yugoslav state security policy and activity?

The struggle of the Yugoslav State Security Service against nationalists was probably the longest of its struggles, and one that Yugoslavia and the Service in the end lost. It is important to note that there were of course also quite a number of communists, including within the Service, who nurtured varying levels of nationalist sentiment. Particularly as regards Serbs and Aleksandar Ranković³, the father of the Yugoslav State Security Service who was purged in the summer of 1966, the line between rigid party-state centralism and Serbian nationalism has been vigorously debated. Personally, I find it necessary to state that a number of the latter-day readings of Ranko-

3 Aleksandar Ranković (1909–1983), aka "Leka" and "Marko", was since the late 1930s a close associate of Josip Broz Tito. In the ranks of Partisan leadership he was responsible for constituting the political police units OZNA, later transformed to UDBA. In 1946–1953 he held the position of Minister of the Interior. In the following years he informally controlled the State security structures from the position of deputy prime minister. From 1963 to 1966 he was vice-president, in fact the second-in-command in the Yugoslav political hierarchy. In 1966 he became a target of a prefabricated accusation of spying on Tito and was discredited for centralism and alleged Serb nationalism. After being dismissed from power and expelled from the Communist Party, Ranković lived until his death in privacy never again showing any political ambitions.

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vić's era, including the reverential treatment accorded him by Serb nationalists, are quite teleological and problematic.

The UDBA severed its contacts with state security services of Soviet bloc countries in 1948 and since then, until the 1980s, was considering and handling them as enemies or adversaries. Which type of contacts did Yugoslav intelligence and police organs practice with its Western counterparts?

Notwithstanding the fact that Yugoslavia remained a communist party-state until 1990, the Yugoslav State Security Service after the end of the Stalinist phase began to develop cooperation with Western intelligence and security services. Most of this cooperation was focused on monitoring the activities of émigré political movements of Yugoslav origin. While many Western governments originally viewed these strongly anti-communist movements with considerable sympathy and even actively supported some of them, as time passed the relationship changed. Yugoslavia's maverick status after 1948 meant that countries like the US and the UK were willing to cooperate and even financially support Tito, and hence the idea of funding anti-communist insurgents lost attraction. The fact that some of the émigrés also began to perpetrate violent attacks on Yugoslav targets – embassies, trade representations, etc. – located in Western Europe, North America and Australia also unnerved Western governments, as Mate Nikola Tokić shows in his new book, *Croatian Radical Separatism*.⁴ Western intelligence and security agencies therefore began to meet with and exchange information with the Yugoslav State Security Service and other Yugoslav intelligence services and diplomats. It is important to stress that this cooperation always took place within an atmosphere of quite substantial suspicion, but the cooperation was extensive and definitely took place.

During the Cold War, the UDBA had a reputation as a feared political police and secret service operating worldwide and using large web of spies and agents. It was commonly known that Yugoslav intelligence carried out illegal operations against the so-called “enemy emigration” on the soil of foreign countries. Nationalists, as well as pro-Soviet Cominformists, were targets of abductions and assassinations. Was it possible to organize these operations without the knowledge of intelligence services of the respective countries?

For obvious reasons, no historian including myself has yet been able to say precisely how many abductions or assassinations the Yugoslavia State Security Service carried out abroad, but based on my research, I am certain that the numbers were in the high dozens if not over 100. It should be emphasized that the Yugoslav authorities viewed such operations as a very risky last resort. If they could “pacify” enemies of

4 TOKIĆ, Mate Nikola: *Croatian Radical Separatism and Diaspora Terrorism During the Cold War*. Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 2020.

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the Yugoslav state by other coercive measures or dissuasion, they preferred to take that route. Certainly, by the early 1970s at the very latest, Western governments such as Italy and West Germany were very aware that the Yugoslav State Security Service was carrying out such operations on their territory and took countermeasures. Some documents from West Germany also illustrate that the West Germans considered that Yugoslavia's value as a mediator between the West and the East was so great that it was not worth compromising the relationship "just" because of Yugoslavia's covert and sometimes violent operations in West Germany.

Many victims of the UDBA's kidnappers and assassins belonged to extremist groups which were responsible for terrorist attacks or which aimed their activity at the violent overthrow of the Titoist regime or were striving for unleashing internal armed conflict. How many of the UDBA's victims were responsible for terrorism or for preparing plans on armed insurgency and civil war in reality?

Again, because of the very incomplete state of archival sources, it is impossible to put precise figures on these phenomena. Undoubtedly, a considerable number of émigrés – though always a minority when viewed in the context of the very large number of Yugoslav émigrés in Western Europe, North America and Australia – wanted to overthrow Tito and communism. The Croats were the most active, and the most ambitious and violent of them were willing to go to great lengths to achieve an independent Croatian state. Virtually all émigré organizations were heavily infiltrated by the Yugoslav State Security Service. A convenient myth circulating in Croatia asserts that all violent operations carried out by Croat émigrés were actually fomented by the Yugoslav State Security Service in order to give Croatian nationalism a bad name. While there were certainly plenty of "agents provocateurs", there were also plenty of young Croats who were willing to take up arms and carry out bombings and similar activities.

The UDBA's "special operations" also targeted persons who committed war crimes and avoided justice by escaping from Yugoslavia in time. Some of them were high-ranking representatives of war-time collaborationist regimes, like Ustasha leader Ante Pavelić, seriously wounded by an assassin in 1957. Other war criminals were kidnapped or extradited by the host countries to Yugoslavia after they were found out and identified by Yugoslav agents. Today we can perhaps admit that in these cases the UDBA proceeded with a certain legitimacy and that even extra-judicial punishment (in the form of assassination) can be seen as a way of exerting justice. Can we compare these operations and successes of the Yugoslav secret service with similar operations provided at the same time, for example, by the Israeli Mossad?

The intent of my research is certainly to demystify and contextualize the operations of the Yugoslav State Security Service outside of Yugoslavia. During the Cold War, many other states of various ideological persuasions carried out covert operations

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abroad, and a number of them perpetrated abductions and assassinations. Recognizing these facts is not the same as condoning the illegal and/or violent means adopted. However, as shown by the cooperation between Yugoslav and Western intelligence services mentioned above, many non-communist states accepted and recognized that Yugoslavia as a sovereign state would seek to protect itself and its interests abroad from attack. Whether the means and methods employed were morally right, proportional to the threat, illegal, legitimate, etc., is an entirely different question, as is the question of whether the strategy and tactics ultimately were effective. There is, for example, ample reason to think that every assassination carried out by the Yugoslav State Security Service led into a circle of violence, prompting outrage and anger among émigrés, which then led to more radicalization and émigré violence, which in turn led to more assassinations, etc. In this sense, the Yugoslav case shares certain similarities with the history of Israeli state-sanctioned assassinations told in riveting form by the journalist Ronen Bergman in his book, *Rise and Kill First*.⁵ And one could of course also explore similarities with US “targeted killings” of real and alleged terrorists in the period since 9/11.

The history of the UDBA can be divided into two periods: before the fall of the long-time minister for internal affairs and close Tito collaborator Aleksandar Ranković in 1966, and after. Ranković was instrumentally accused of abuse of power and of supporting centralism and etatism. As a consequence of these claims the UDBA was decentralized to the level of federal units – republics, whereas federal organs kept a coordination role only. Could you explain a little bit how this decentralized system of political police and intelligence was functioning? Were there quarrels or contestation among the republican secret services?

It is certainly the case that both the Yugoslav state and the Yugoslav State Security Service were decentralized after the purge of Ranković. The culmination of this decentralization was the 1974 constitution, which devolved almost everything in the state except for foreign policy and control of the armed forces to the six republics and the two autonomous provinces. In practice, this meant that each republic was primarily responsible for policing (both public and state security) on its own territory, and that if operations were restricted to one republic, then there was no need for federal involvement. The Federal State Security Service largely became a supervising and coordinating mechanism for operations involving more than one federal unit. This was in large part an attempt to also avoid quarrels or contestation among the republican and provincial state security services. In practice, a lot of coordination was required and did take place, such as when a Bosnian Croat suspected of extreme nationalism moved from Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina to study at the University of Zagreb, and then perhaps subsequently emigrated to Munich or Vienna. By and

5 BERGMAN, Ronen: *Rise and kill first: the secret history of Israel's targeted assassinations*. John Murray, London 2018.

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large, the system functioned quite well until the late 1980s, when rivalries and diverging paths began to take their toll and pave the way for the collapse of the Yugoslav state. In the context of operations outside of Yugoslavia, it is important to emphasize that every single action of every single operation carried out abroad had to involve and be approved by the Federal State Security Service.

Since 1966 the republican security organs were also responsible for battle against “enemy emigration” coming from their own republics or nations. The Croatian security service focused on fighting the Ustasha emigration, the Serbian service has the Serb nationalist emigration (the so-called Chetniks) in its competence. How did this system work in the case of fighting the Albanian (both right and leftist) nationalist exiles?

I have to date not done much research on the Yugoslav State Security Service’s work on ethnic Albanian nationalism or irredentism. However, in the context of the decentralization of the state, after 1974 all work focused on this topic would have had to involve the State Security Service of the autonomous province of Kosovo. That provincial service would have coordinated its operations closely with the Serbian State Security Service and, of course, the Federal State Security Service. I know that the Croatian State Security Service, for example, also closely monitored the activities of ethnic Albanians residing in Croatia, and I am sure that this took place elsewhere as well. It should also be noted that after 1966, a substantial number of ethnic Albanians also became employed in the state security service.

Although the “special operations”, including kidnappings and assassinations, were executed by republican security organs, they were authorized by approval of the highest state leadership on the federal level. The mechanism of the decision-making process in such delicate issues is until today highly disputable and surrounded by speculations. Did your research shed more light on this issue? Who among the highest-ranking Yugoslav representatives bore the final responsibility? What was the personal responsibility of J. B. Tito?

I am quite convinced based on my research and on the information that came to light during the Munich trial⁶ that all abduction and assassination operations which took place until the death of Tito in 1980 were personally approved by him. I am equally certain that we are highly unlikely to ever find any written evidence of these decisions because sources and common sense suggest that they were issued orally. As regards the period after Tito’s death, the most plausible scenario is that decisions

6 The Munich Trial took place from October 2014 to August 2016. Two former high-ranking officials of Croatian, resp. Yugoslav State Security, Josip Perković and Zdravko Mustać, were tried before the Bavarian court for organizing the murder of Stjepan Đureković, a Croatian political émigré in West Germany, in 1983. Both accused men were found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment (later changed to 40 years in the case of Zdravko Mustać).

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to carry out assassinations were taken by the members of the Federal Committee for the Protection of the Constitutional Order (Savezni savet za zaštitu ustavnog poretka) in conjunction with select officials from the republic(s) from which the target stemmed.

According to testimonies gathered by journalists and publicists, the by-effect of “special operations” was interconnecting of Yugoslav intelligence services with the criminal underground and organized crime. As some media reported, Yugoslav state security had to finance its illegal operations from secret sources, coming from financial machinations and other criminal activity. The assassins were in some cases hired killers with criminal backgrounds. Did your research confirm or rather disprove such claims which mostly came from secret or uncertain sources?

Yes, documentary evidence and insider witnesses confirm that in some cases the Yugoslav State Security Service availed itself of the assistance of known Yugoslav criminals, particularly those who were active in Western Europe, in order to perpetrate assassinations. In some cases, these individuals later increased their notoriety by their involvement in the formation of paramilitary groups in the wars of the 1990s.

In the end, Yugoslavia was not destroyed from the outside, by the emigration groups, but its dissolution came from inside. In the second half of the 1980s the antagonism between the republics and their leaderships grew rapidly. Which role did republican security structures play in the process, which led finally to the break-up of the country and to the wars?

The epilogue of my book starts to explore but does not fully answer this very sensitive question. A whole book (at least!) deserves to be written about the collaboration between, in particular, the Croatian State Security and Croat émigrés. Through a very complicated and often confusing set of events, these erstwhile mortal enemies became bedfellows in the beginning of the 1990s. Simply put, a tacit deal was reached in which many members of the Croatian State Security Service, including those who had been responsible for monitoring extreme émigrés, were allowed to play a major role in the new intelligence and security services of the newly independent Croatian state. Their skills and experience were put to use in the struggle against the Croatian Serb insurgency supported by the Serbian and federal Yugoslav authorities. In turn, little or no retributive actions or lustration were conducted against the old guard. The partnership of President Franjo Tuđman, Croatia's first president, and a former nationalist dissident and Josip Perković, who had led the section of the Croatian State Security Service responsible for countering the émigré threat, is the best example of this deal.

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Finally, I would like to ask you about the accessibility of archival documents regarding the activity of the UDBA. What is the situation in individual countries of former Yugoslavia and what about your personal experience as a researcher and user of archives?

I have to date had experience with using archival documents related to the Yugoslav State Security Service in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. Of those Yugoslav successor states, Slovenia was the first one to grant broad access to the relevant documentation. A few years later, Croatia followed suit, and the situation there is quite acceptable, though there are certainly indications that some material has not been properly transferred to the state archives. In Serbia, the situation is quite restrictive, though some colleagues there have proved adept at navigating the situation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the situation is very difficult and the relevant archives are not universally accessible to researchers.