Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953 marked the end of the tension and uncertainty which had characterised the previous five years. Henceforth Yugoslavia’s experiment with communism proceeded within a more stable division of Europe. While its international position remained in some sense ambiguous since it had interests in developing and sustaining working relationships with both East and West in the Cold War, its domestic organisation was innovative, dynamic and highly experimental. Above all, Tito’s Yugoslavia was, by the regime’s own admittance, peculiar to the specific circumstances of Cold War, retarded economic development and multi-ethnicity with which the LCY leadership had to grapple.

The régime assiduously cultivated the perception, widely held among western practitioners and scholars at least until the early 1970s, that there was a direct line of continuity between the post-Cominform state which emerged in the 1950s and the embryonic political system introduced during ‘the great liberation struggle’ of the Second World War. This fitted the thrust of post-1948 doctrine which maintained that Stalin and not the Yugoslav leadership, was the true deviant from Marxist–Leninist teaching and that this, rather than wilfulness on the part of Tito and his colleagues, was the real cause of the dispute in 1948. As with all myths which gain widespread credibility, it contained more than an element of truth. Nevertheless, the Yugoslav political system which developed after 1948 was the product of a need arising from unanticipated circumstances inherent in the tensions arising from the divisions which ran through Yugoslav society. Titoism, as Yugoslavia’s legitimating ideology came to be known in western scholarship, was the consequence and not the cause of the conflict with Stalin and represented the leadership’s response to the challenge Stalin imposed on their continued leadership of the Yugoslav communist movement.1

The post-Cominform Yugoslav state was built on three pillars. It obtained ideological legitimacy through the pursuit of communist utopia and by reference to Marxist–Leninist dogma as well as to specifically Yugoslav communist constructions concerning the harmony of the
Yugoslav peoples and the equality of all in the wartime liberation struggle. Worker’s self-management and the People’s Front provided the structure through which the teleological goal of communist utopia was to be achieved. Internationally, the régime sought to meet the basic requirement to sustain its own security and prosperity by a pragmatic balancing of its relations with both camps in the Cold War, while extending its influence and raising its profile through a policy of co-operation with the non-aligned states of the post-imperial world.

POLITICS AND SOCIETY, 1953–61

‘Yugoslavism’

Mobilisation of the population in support of the revolution was at the heart of the Tito régime’s policy towards cultural issues from the outset. The need to sustain popular enthusiasm through what could only be a difficult period of state-building was behind the equivocal policy adopted towards the multiple religious authorities which still carried considerable allegiance with the peoples of Yugoslavia. We have already seen how this inherently atheistic régime used a combination of repression and compromise in seeking to undermine the ability of the religious leaders to act as a focal point for their communities, while at the same time avoiding the appearance of systematic persecution of the ecclesiastical office holders which might result in generating a coherent opposition to communism. This was not atypical of the practice of the European communist regimes throughout this period.

The process of attempting to cultivate a common Yugoslav identity did not really begin until the mid-1950s. The 1948 census revealed that the numbers identifying themselves as ‘Yugoslav’ as opposed to an ethnic identity was as low as 5.1 per cent. While this mattered less prior to the dispute with the Cominform because the Yugoslav régime was appealing to internationalist values of the communist movement, in particular worker’s solidarity across ethnic and national boundaries, once the Tito régime was required to develop a theory of the specifically Yugoslav road to communism, it naturally required that this Yugoslav identity be given some substance. Accordingly, the régime launched a campaign to promote the idea of ‘integral Yugoslavism’ (Jugosloventsvo) as a common culture. The foundations for this were provided by the