4 The Second Yugoslavia

A FEDERATION AND ITS INTERNAL BORDERS

The first post-World War II constitution, passed by the communist-dominated Constituent Assembly in January 1946, abolished the monarchy and proclaimed the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, the first in the series of people's republics constituted on the Soviet model in Eastern Europe under Soviet control. True to its revolutionary ideology, the Communist party of Yugoslavia set out to create a new state and a new society which bore no relation to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia except for its name. Accordingly, the new state found its origins in the rather mythical acts of self-determination of its five constituent nations – Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs and Slovenes – allegedly performed at the meeting of the Partisan assembly, AVNOJ, on 29 November 1943, and at other meetings of regional national liberation committees. In this fictive account, the five nations – or their members, irrespective of the federal republic in which they lived in Yugoslavia – exercised once and for all their right of self-determination by uniting into the federation established in November 1945.¹

Following the 1936 USSR constitution, the six republics – Croatia, Bosnia–Hercegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia – held the honorific title of ‘states’, while Vojvodina was an autonomous province and Kosovo–Metohija an autonomous region within the republic of Serbia. In actual practice, political power, once again on the Soviet model, was concentrated in the highly centralised Communist party and its highest executive organ, the Politburo, whose members were chosen by the Party’s general-secretary Tito. Since his appointment to this highest position in the Party by the Comintern in Moscow in 1937, Tito had picked for the top Party positions those members who were personally loyal to him. During the war, the Partisan propaganda created a ‘personality cult’ of Tito, extolling him, through various marching songs and propaganda sheets, as the great leader of the Yugoslav struggle for liberation. Until 1948, this cult of Tito was second only to the cult of Stalin; after the break with Stalin in 1948, Tito’s cult had no rival. Likewise, from 1948 until his death in 1980 Tito had no serious political rival in the Yugoslav Communist party or in the
country at large: he was the undisputed Party leader who governed the
country through a coterie of handpicked officials.

Like its model the USSR, Yugoslavia was a centralised one-party
state displaying the trappings of a federation based on a fictive self-de-
termination of its nations. In such a state, the borders between the fed-
eral units were of little practical political importance. This in fact was
made clear by Tito in a speech during his first postwar visit to Zagreb:

These [federal] borders . . . should be something similar to those
white lines on a marble column . . . What is the meaning of federal
units in today's Yugoslavia? We don't consider them a group of small
nations; rather they have a more administrative character, the free-
dom to govern oneself. That is the character of independence of
each federal unit, full independence in the sense of free cultural and
economic development.²

Although there has been no official explanation of how the borders
between the new republics were drawn in 1946, most (but not all)
of them roughly follow the pre-1914 international as well as Austro–
Hungarian provincial borders, almost none of which coincided with
the boundaries between the national groups. Thus the border between
Bosnia–Hercegovina and Serbia followed the international border
between the Ottoman (later, Austro–Hungarian) empire, to which
Bosnia–Hercegovina belonged, and the independent kingdom of Serbia.
The borders between Bosnia–Hercegovina and Croatia followed, with
only minor corrections, the border between the Ottoman and Austro–
Hungarian empires, which, with the Austro–Hungarian annexation of
Bosnia–Hercegovina in 1908, became a provincial boundary within
Austria–Hungary.³ In a few places the communist leaders substantially
modified the old borders to take into account the nationality of the
majority populations in the particular area. Thus the border between
Croatia and Serbia (in the northern province of Vojvodina) was modi-
fied so as to allow some (but not all) Serb-majority areas (such as
Srem) to be transferred to Serbia and a Croat-populated area, Baranja,
to be transferred to Croatia. In a similar way the south Adriatic area
of Boka Kotorska with a majority Serb or Montenegrin population
was assigned to Montenegro. The former Austro–Hungarian province
of Dalmatia and the pre-1945 Italian province of Istria were also incor-
porated into the federal republic of Croatia presumably on the ground
that Dalmatians and Istrians belong to the Croat nation.⁴ These modi-
fications appear to have been rather arbitrary, given the range of simi-
lar modifications which could also have been made. In a similar