In addition to rapid economic decline and the outbreak of violence in Kosovo, in the 1980s Yugoslavia experienced a veritable renaissance of nationalist ideologies of the ‘dominant nation’ type. As we have seen, arguments based on national ideologies of this type reappeared in intellectual and political debates in the late 1950s and 1960s. However, in the aftermath of the suppression of the mass national movement in Croatia in 1971, the publication of any texts of vaguely nationalist content was effectively banned in all parts of Yugoslavia, except in Kosovo. While ending public polemics by national ideologues, the ban confined nationalist polemics to the closely watched realm of intellectual dissidence. All intellectual dissidents aimed primarily at the delegitimation of the existing communist regime in Yugoslavia. Nationalist – as opposed to liberal – dissidents argued that this regime had betrayed the principal national goals of their respective nations and thereby lost the right to rule over that particular nation. Each of the national ideologies claimed that the communist regime intentionally belittled and disadvantaged ‘its’ nation and benefited its competitor nation or nations. However absurd these claims may appear when taken together, they reveal how limited was the target of each national ideology: it was targeting only ‘its’ nation in its attempt to prove that the communist regime had failed that nation alone and should not have the right to rule over it. Apart from nationalist dissidents, marxist academics, contributors to the international philosophy journal Praxis, which was banned in 1975, formed an internationally well-known group of dissidents both in Belgrade and Zagreb. A smaller group of liberal political theorists and writers was also active in these two capitals as well as in Ljubljana. Although they often held opposing views, all of them were in the early 1980s united in their rejection of the communist regime. Many of them – especially nationalists and marxists – in the 1970s and early 1980s attacked the communist regime with the same ardour with which they earlier – from 1945 to the middle 1960s – supported it as its official apologists.1
As the regime, after Tito’s death, appeared to be losing popular support, the dissidents were able to raise their public profile again. Revisionist historical works were published questioning the official views of the National Liberation Struggle and of the immediate post-World War II period. A leading publishing house in Belgrade, by an oversight, published in 1981 a collection of poems including several with transparently anti-Tito verses. The Party officials reacted by banning the offending works and at times gaoling their authors. But these actions brought much wider publicity to the dissidents than they could have hoped otherwise. Although they never commanded a significant following, their target audience, the intelligentsia, developed a growing sympathy for their views, especially as their dissidence appeared to attract – at least in Slovenia and Serbia – only limited punishment. Intellectual dissidents, however differing might have been their views, appeared to offer a fresh and different approach to the problems confronting Yugoslav society which the Yugoslav ideology of socialist self-management could hardly explain let alone solve.

From September 1987 when Milošević started to purge the Serbian communist elite, the position of most dissidents – first in Serbia and then in Slovenia and finally in Croatia – radically changed. First they were allowed access to the mainstream media and, then, their republican communist leaders and media started to use the rhetoric of the dissident – primarily nationalist – programmes. This takeover of nationalist rhetoric was clearly an attempt by the communist leaderships in almost all republics to regain legitimacy through a change in their ideological image. In this new field of nationalist politics, communists-turned-nationalists soon faced formidable opposition from the very dissidents who first articulated nationalist ideologies. In late 1989 and early 1990 dissidents of all persuasions turned into party politicians, becoming leaders and founders of new opposition parties. In the first multiparty elections of 1990, in all republics, except Serbia and Montenegro, former nationalist dissidents won power. In Serbia and Montenegro the communist parties were able to retain power, in part, by taking over the dissident nationalist programme first made public in 1986. In retrospect, the 1980s in Yugoslavia could be viewed as a slow but steady march of nationalist ideologies from dissidence to power.

KOSOVO ALBANIAN NATIONALISM

The Kosovo Albanian riots of 1981 were the first large-scale – and violent – manifestation of nationalism in Yugoslavia since the Croat mass