As in other areas of civil–military relations, professionalisation questions in the Yugoslav case are different from those in most other former communist countries. Whereas professionalisation has been an important topic in other former communist countries in terms of developing relations with Western militaries and transitions to democracy, in the Yugoslav–Serbian context, the topic has been framed by atrocity-ridden war. While discussion in the Yugoslav context has certainly emphasised military professionals in the sense of having a paid volunteer element in the army, it poses significant question marks against those aspects of professionalism that embrace ethics and notions of responsibility. As is argued below, however, the competence and expertise developed in the Yugoslav army (Vojska Jugoslavije – VJ) may be the instrument by which it may as yet be able to forge cooperation with Western armed forces.

The evolution of professionalisation

Although the post-1945 Yugoslav federal military always had career officers – ones very much vested in the vocational mission of defending Tito’s communist way – the term ‘professionalisation’ made its first significant appearance in 1987.¹ This was in the context of a decision to begin limited recruitment of contract non-commissioned officers, increasing the regular component of the Yugoslav People’s Army (Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija – JNA). Prior to this, the Yugoslav military had two main characteristics – its political mission and its emphasis on universal male service. Yugoslav defence operated on two tiers. The first of these was the JNA, the regular army. The JNA had a career cadre office corps, but otherwise relied on conscription to fill the ranks.
After military service, an individual would either become part of the territorial reserve of the JNA, or of the second tier of defence. This was the Territorial Defence Forces (Teritorijalne Obrane – TO) organised in each component part by the states and provinces that comprised the Yugoslav Federation. This meant that there was the potential to mobilise almost the entire male population, depending on need.

While this system was always present in some form throughout the Tito period, for much of that time it had more meaning in theory than in practice. The reality was that until 1968, the territorial component of the doctrine of All-People’s Defence had little real meaning and all territorial units, if they had any substance, were subordinate to the JNA. This ensured the superior position of the JNA and reinforced its own sense of its competence and importance. However, in terms of the strategic conception underpinning the territorial defence system, this structure was ineffective and not seriously capable of being the deterrent to Soviet (or, in principle, NATO) attack that it was claimed to be.

The territorial arrangement was given greater strength and credibility under the 1969 doctrine of General People’s Defence. This move was unpopular with the JNA, but was necessary if the deterrent posture of peoples-in-arms was to be made credible. This shift was made necessary by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which sharpened minds to the possibility of having to defend Yugoslavia for real. Thus, considerable reality was given to the defence in depth that the territorial system ostensibly offered, as planning, command and control of the territorial units were given substance at the republican level. In effect, under communist rule, each state in the federation had its own armed force. This was deeply unpopular with the JNA, but the regular army leadership could not deny that the previous arrangements were weak. However, in principle under this arrangement, the relative superiority of the JNA was emphasised. It was to be the front line of defence, holding back an invader for 48 hours to allow mobilisation, and then, where circumstances permitted, taking the lead. This leading position was based on an understanding of the JNA’s greater expertise and competence in the planning and execution of military operations – what might otherwise have been called its ‘professionalism’.

Despite the growing importance of ‘professionalism’ and expertise in the context of a conscript army, the political characteristic of the JNA was paramount. Tito’s partisans were responsible for the formation of the communist federation after 1945, having effectively won the Second World War on the Yugoslav lands. Transformed into the Yugoslav army at the end of the war and renamed the JNA after 1948,