

YUGOSLAVIA'S VERY SECRET SERVICE

The UDBA is probably the least known major espionage agency of the Cold War. It remains influential despite the break up of the country it was formed to defend.

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Marshal Tito (left) and Aleksander Ranković on a hunting expedition at Karadjordjevo, Yugoslavia, 1957.









The CIA, the KGB, Mossad and MI6 are familiar, if inevitably opaque, names of secret services that played major roles in the Cold War. Yet among the spy agencies that emerged from the ashes of the Second World War, the UDBA of the former Yugoslavia is barely known at all. Formally dismantled during the country's violent break-up in 1991, its legacy lives on in the form of rogue spies, business magnates, politicians and next-generation insiders with familial ties to the former communist regime.

The UDBA (*Uprava Drzavne Bezbednosti* or State Security Administration, as it is sometimes referred to in English) still has a notorious reputation in the Balkans. Political rivals trade accusations that their opponents have ties to the former agency, while 'lustration committees' in the former Yugoslav republics – Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo – have assembled voluminous lists of suspected informants, code names and secret missions. The intention of such committees was not to arrest people, but to identify informants so that they could be denied state jobs in the future. Yet attempts to sever old connections and relationships across former Yugoslavia have never gained much traction in comparison to efforts made in ex-Warsaw Pact countries.

Two reasons lie behind this. The first is due to the clever posturing of Josip Broz Tito, leader of the Yugoslav Partisan movement during the Second World War and founder in 1945 of communist Yugoslavia. Seeking to balance East and West, Tito oversaw a 'softer' communism than that imposed on other Eastern Bloc states. Although criticism of the regime was discouraged, citizens enjoyed wider

Tito (centre) with Ranković on his left along with other Partisan leaders, 1944.



opportunities for work and could travel almost anywhere on a Yugoslav passport.

Second, unlike the relatively peaceful independence process of post-Soviet states, Yugoslavia disintegrated in a complex civil war in the 1990s in which UDBA networks cooperated with one another – and with various foreign intelligence agencies – on military intelligence and the increasingly corrupt business practices facilitated by war, international sanctions and closed borders. Now that the Balkans is peaceful, the UDBA's

violent excesses have largely been forgotten, allowing its clandestine members to transform themselves into 'respectable' members of society, such as professors, politicians and businessmen.

Age of expansion

By 1945 Tito's Partisans had defeated not only the occupying Germans and Bulgarians – who had invaded the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in April 1941 – but also internal rivals like the Serbian nationalist Četnik movement and the

Tito is welcomed on a state visit to London by Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, March 1953.

Croatian fascist Ustaše. The country Tito inherited, while expanding the borders of the former royalist Yugoslavia, was largely agrarian, impoverished war ravaged. Aside from the option of emigration, social advancement was dependent upon joining the Communist Party, the military or the UDBA. This phenomenon both expedited dissident emigration and created Communist and UDBA dynasties that still exert influence.

Tito had cemented his authority by 1946, reaching ad-hoc deals with foreign leaders, a balancing act between West and East that would also involve outreach to the developing world. Yugoslavia became a founding member of the 'Non-Aligned' movement – a group of nations not aligned with or against any major power bloc – founded in its capital Belgrade in 1961. Through this relationship, Tito would expand political ideology, business contracts and intelligence capacities far and wide.

Yet internal and external threats remained. Both Bulgaria and Hungary appeared predatory following Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, a time when civil war was raging in Greece, just south of Yugoslavia's Macedonian republic. The thorny issue of Macedonia – a geographical region crossing Yugoslavian, Greek and Bulgarian territory – had sparked conflicts for almost 70 years, during the Ottoman Empire's slow retreat from the Balkans. In 1934 a gunman from the secessionist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), aided by Croat nationalists, had assassinated the Serbian King Aleksander in Paris. For Tito (who would also be targeted for assassination by Stalin in subsequent years) creating a ruthless and efficient secret service was vital.

The Yugoslav dictator found his man in

Aleksander Ranković, a Serbian Partisan veteran whose wife and mother had been murdered by the Gestapo. For over two decades, until his dramatic downfall in 1966 (due to alleged complicity in a plot against Tito), Ranković was the third most powerful man in Yugoslavia. In 1944 he established OZNA (*Odeljenje za zaštitu naroda*, Department of National Security), which in 1946 he transformed into the UDBA.

UDBA operations were shaped by perceived internal and external threats. Under Ranković, it secured secret mountain ammunition dumps, protected railway traffic, spied on foreign diplomats, tapped phones, opened mail and interrogated perceived domestic enemies, from politicians to peasants resisting collectivist labour. Basic training in official UDBA spy schools (with headquarters in Belgrade) lasted two years and involved physical training, language courses, military and diplomatic intelligence and criminal investigation.

Black operations

As he consolidated internal stability, Tito also watched warily abroad. Numerous rivals had emigrated or escaped after the war (including many Ustaše members, shepherded by Croatian Catholic priests in Italy along the Nazi 'ratlines' to Argentina). UDBA would be tasked with spying on such Yugoslavian émigrés. UDBA black operations were affected as liberal protests in the West sparked similar ones in the late 1960s in Yugoslavia. By 1974, the country had a new constitution, introduced as an attempt to placate restless nationalists by decentralising power. UDBA's response to diaspora dissent materialised in some of the bloodiest and most brutal assassinations –



probably in excess of 100 – of the Cold War.

Their methods were simple, effective and organised on an ethnic basis. Typically the ‘task’ would be delegated to the republic-level UDBA leadership of the target in question, using officers of the same ethnic background. After infiltrating the relevant diaspora circle, UDBA agents would encourage paranoia, infighting and confusion through disinformation and gossip. This inevitably created tensions locally, giving the Yugoslavian authorities ‘plausible deniability’. After the assassination – usually, carried out by close-range shooting or stabbing – the event could simply be explained away as the unfortunate

outcome of rivalries within closed ethnic communities. Using agents with connections to the criminal underworld further helped to conceal any Yugoslavian government involvement.

Local police thus often avoided investigating such cases, whether they were carried out in Britain, West Germany, the United States, Canada, Australia or South America. The relatively hands-off approach to UDBA operations was not only a by-product of ignorance, however, but also of the differing western political perceptions of ‘soft-communist’ Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union’s hardline Eastern Bloc. Thus, while the

Tito (centre) with the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev (right) and Edvard Kardelj, President of the Yugoslavia Council, Moscow, June 1956.

infamous KGB-assisted murder of the Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in London in September 1978 sparked a detailed investigation and extensive news coverage, few remember the assassination of the Croatian dissident Bruno Bušić in Paris a month later. The lack of enthusiasm for official investigations, even when the UDBA was suspected, reflected the West's perception that Tito was a useful ally against the Soviets.

Professional operation

Many UDBA operations transgressed the limits of morality, such as the 1972 killing of the Croatian terrorist Stjepan Ševo in Italy and the 1977 assassination of the Serb extremist Dragiša Kašiković in Chicago; murders which also left innocent bystanders – including children – dead. Other missions were arguably more justifiable, as is the case with the 1969 assassination of former Ustaše commander Vjekoslav Luburić, in Spain. Luburić had overseen the Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia during the Second World War, at which hundreds of thousands of Serbs and Jews had been murdered. The UDBA considered its slow and patient penetration of Luburić's expatriate entourage a highly professional operation.

During the 1990s, Yugoslavia disintegrated during a series of bloody civil wars drawn along ethnic and religious lines. The disbanded UDBA's personnel manned the security structures of their own states-in-formation while cooperating with their former colleagues across the newly-established borders. At a time of irregular warfare and international sanctions, there was considerable demand for those who knew the hidden locations of old weapons depots or who could route contraband oil and other essential goods

through little-known border crossings.

Thus the UDBA essentially became a decentralised criminal entity – a secret society hidden in plain sight. Even today among the populations of the former Yugoslavia, one can find ex-assassins collecting pensions, 'nationalist' politicians with communist roots, businessmen with wealth of dubious provenance and former agents acting as mercenaries for foreign powers. With riches accrued from decades of privileges and, sometimes, criminal activities, the extended families of the UDBA are likely to continue to prosper well into the future.

Successor states

The West's disinterest in the UDBA's legacy was due, first and foremost, to the overarching imperative for regional stability after the Second World War. It required a certain tolerance of people who had become embedded within the security and political establishment of Yugoslavia's successor states. Despite the occasional call for prosecutions, or a local media story about alleged former UDBA informants, too much time has passed. The momentum for 'cleaning out' Eastern Europe's ex-communist elements has long since subsided. For better or for worse, Yugoslavia's infamous secret service seems destined to remain an enigma – even as its activities resonate today.

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