Mile Bjelajac

MILITARY ELITES

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITIES:
THE CASE OF YUGOSLAVIA, 1918-1980
Many historians and other analysts have paid attention, more or less successfully, on military factor in former Yugoslavia. Obviously that fact proves that there is a real interest in such a subject. In the opinion of this author there is plenty of room for further researches, which will improve our knowledge. We could list several well-known and inevitable scholarly works of our dear colleagues concerning East European or Yugoslav history in particular, and show traces or influence produced by older literature. Those old works, especially on Kingdom of Yugoslavia had been affected by political attitudes and quarrels. The general remark of the preset author is that previous approaches were to narrow. These authors emphasized political role of military representatives, some times of a few important or well-known persons, as well as of the Army in the frame of a multi ethnic society.¹

We would like to try to enlarged the field of interest and take into account many more aspects in which military elite, or army in general exercised influence on society.

In the past and present, every country, at war, in revolution, or merely at cold war, has faced problems of relations between civilians and the military. The clashes between military values and civilian ones appeared very often. The military may easily become focus of discontent and the strongest alternative to civilian government. Thus the questions of military elites always emphasizes the type of civil-military relations, democracy, militarism, modernization, and military structure itself (recruitment, social and national origins, education level, social status, prestige, internal differentiation on an elite "cadre" and elite "nucleus" etc.) Furthermore, we cannot avoid questions of relations between military and other elites (especially economic ones) in the frame of military-industrial complex, and also question of legitimacy.²

What does the case of Yugoslav military elites show?

First of all, can we lay out some new aspects of its characters or even structure?

For the moment, purpose of this paper is not to cover all the topics that we have previously mentioned but to present more, in our opinion very interesting results of our ongoing researches.

Yugoslav officer corps was created by unification of several different elements: former Serbian (3,500), Montenegrin (469), Austro-Hungarian (2,590) and Russian (12) army officers. Step by step, on the eve of W.W.II it became a new corps, educated in Yugoslavia (over 85% out of 10,000). This unification was not only military matter but political one too. In spite of good intentions of military and civilian rulers (including Prince Alexander), practice was faced with opponents both from among the officers as well as from the public at large. Some prejudices or myths about that matter created in those days persisted up to date and we can find it’s echoes even in the scholarly literature.

By social origin, Serbian highly educated officers had been predominantly (75%) from tiny bourgeois class. Officers with Military Academy, some faculties and supplemented education, in a decade before W.W.I constituted some 77-80% (in 1907 76,8% out of 2.021) of career officer corps.³ Others came from the ranks (noncommissioned officers - NCO, reserve officers, private soldiers etc). We do not have precise data on their social background. We can only state with certainty that reserve officers at least had some kind of secondary school, i.e. six or eight years of regular education, whereas noncommissioned officers had eight years of schooling.

The Balkan wars and World War I affected badly officer corps in terms of numbers. For example, the rate of casualties of the graduates from 1899-1914 who had entered the wars
as majors or in lower ranks, averaged 38.1% (490 out of 1.286). The percentage varied from class to class in a scale from 16.6 up to 62.¹

Concerning previously mentioned pre-wars Serbian officer corps, it should be emphasized that outstanding social position and prestige of officer corps in poor, predominantly peasant (over 85%) Serbian society had been improved by marriages with girls from the bourgeois families (99.8%). This process was carefully encouraged by lows and regulations at the time.²

What can we conclude if we take a look at the part of the k.u.k. officer corps admitted into new created Yugoslav Army, what we can find out?

In brief, according to Deak, in 1910 there was only 2.4% Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS), or in total 427 out of 17.808 k. u. k. officers in active service. That shows decline of 1.5% in comparison to data of 1897. In a same period there was only 35 SCS in all classes of Military Academy, 17 out of that number were Serbs. Military and Technics Academy, mainly schools for sons of military and civil elite (much of them nobles) lost their elite character in the Twentieth century, especially on the eve of W.W.I. Only graduates of the military academies had good chance of making it into the General staff and thus ending up as Generals. For the staff officers it was possible to obtain that rank at the age of 53, but for the others only at the age of 58 or 61. On November 1, 1918. there were 25 south Slavs out of 375 actively serving Generals (or 6.6%).³

The majority of Yugoslavs enrolled in one of the nineteen Cadet schools (Kadettenschulen). Those schools, predominantly for the less prestigious infantry could admit 1.000 youngsters annually. In practice, however, there were never enough students. The number of total enrollment on three years fell steadily (from 3.333 in 1897, 2.279 in 1907 to 1.864 in 1911). After those schools future officers served first for two years as cadets.

In k.u.k. military practice it was also possible to become career officer from the reserve corps or from the ranks (14.3%).

It is important to point out, that casualty rate among k.u.k. officers was tremendous. By the end of 1914. 3.168 officers (out of 18.000 career and 14.000 reserve, and 25.000 of various categories activated) were killed, and other casualties amounted to 22.310 (50%). Throughout the war 15.408 were killed and 8.000 died in captivity. For example, from class, which graduated from the Military Academy in 1913 (134), 30% died in war, some were badly wounded, some lost (in total 51.9% casualties).⁴

It is well known that preponderant influence on Yugoslav Royal army was exercised by Serbian General corps. However, as opposed to some claims that there were no others among Generals but a few non-Serbs (2 Croats and 2 Slovenes), according to the researches of this author, it can be said that there were 12 former Montenegrin and 64 former k.u.k. officers in General/Admiral corps (out of 506). Percentage of those Generals in active service had increased, especially in last six years before the W.W.II. (6.5% in 1936, 23.5% in 1940/41).⁵

Among Yugoslav Generals of Serbian origin, beside the Military Academy, 36% of the Generals had finished the War Academy too. In addition next 23% have passed preparations for General staff. Of officers in Services, 10% graduated from faculties (74% out of that number abroad). Also 10% of them have passed schools, military academies or war academies abroad, and 15% out of strata spent longer periods on various courses or specialization. Among Generals and Admirals who hailed from the former "k. u k." army, originally only 38% had finished Military, Technics or Naval Academy (25 in total), 52% Cadet schools (34), 12% had graduated from faculties (8). In advanced training in
Monarchy 17% finished the War Academy (11) and some of them preparations for General staff.

Irrespective of decline in desirable social descent of newly created Yugoslav officer corps, the old Guard was rooted in bourgeois (middle) class. This was especially so with Generals who were connected by marriages, in high percentage (45%) to the richest families (by local standards).

As for the rest of the Serbian and former k.u.k. officers we can state the following.

According to the "Yugoslav Army’s rank list for the officers in active service" after some retiring or abandoning army by own decision, there had been left in ranks 1,979 former k.u.k. officers (353 superiors) in 1924. Among superior officers 15% had finished the Military Academy, 61,7% had finished the Cadet school, 17,5% had graduated from faculties and 5,6% came from the ranks etc. On the other hand, there was a group of 1064 former Serbian superior officers. Among them 65,6% had finished the Military Academy, in addition 26,7% had finished the Higher school of Military Academy (War Academy), 6% had graduated from faculties and 28% came from the ranks (out of them 11,8% Colonels, 29% Lieutenant colonels, 54,3% Majors). As a result of war in the next lower rank (Captains I. class), which included the last pre-war class (46) of Military Academy, the rate of officers who came from the ranks amounted to 83,27% (among former k.u.k. 31,25%). Most of them had previously been noncommissioned officers (64%).

World War II and social revolution made deep cut in continuity of Yugoslav military elites.

After the so-called "April war" in 1941 majority of active officer corps was sent to prisoners’ camps in Germany and a smaller number in Italy. At the end of June 1941 there were 13.559 officers in German captivity, mainly Serbs, Slovenes and Jews. Very few Croats remained with their comrades. Majority of Croats was admitted into the army of newly created Croat State (3.300 Generals, officers and cadets from military schools).

Serbian military elite, General corps, and in smaller scale those of former k.u.k. disappeared from the historical stage at the end of the war. On the eve of the W.W.II, out of 506, some 17,19% had died in inter-war period, 3,75% died at home during the war years, 2,37% in captivity and 2% were killed in action or in bombing of Belgrade. Some 20% (mainly retired Generals), spent the war years inactively at home. Out of some 200 Generals who had been taken prisoners, 47% returned home during or at the end of the war, and 36,5% more or 73 in total (included some refuges in 1944 and 1945) chose life of emigrants, rather than living under new regime of communism or in order to escape being put on trail for collaboration etc. According to the available data 16 active Generals took a part in Pavelich’s Croat units. Three of them emigrated (one returned home after while), one was punished on death by law-court in 1945. That was the fate of another two in Serbia and Slovenia. For the remaining 93 or 18,37% this author has no data as yet.

In 1946 there were only 12,4% former military personnel in new officer corps. Former officers consisted only 7,7% of the officer corps in 1950. Only 12 former Generals were accepted to the new army, mainly on posts in education and sciences as well as in medical service. Concerning social origin of the new officers, 40% were of peasant and 25% of workers origin. That officer corps had no military education in the beginning but war experience. However it was soon transformed into an educated and trained one (around 90% in 1953). Among Generals or future Generals (up to 1980) 76% (out of 846) passed Higher Military Academy, in addition 27% War Academy and 12% faculties. Around 13% of them were educated or supplementary trained in Russia, USA, France etc. As for their birthplace, 30,13% were born in towns (only 7 in Belgrade). However "village" sometimes can hide social background. There were sons of teachers, priests, or even new
civil servants who removed from villages to cities very soon after their sons had been born. Thus, among them we can find persons who graduated in France or elsewhere in Europe before W.W.II. According to their social status before the war and revolution, 12.5% were peasants and fishermen, 20% workers, 13.4% students, 19.13% pupils, 2.63% teachers, 6.4% civil servants (including highly educated ones), 3.1% medical doctors, 2.15% lawyers, 0.8% engineers, 10.76% army officers, 5.26% noncommissioned officers.

To a smaller degree than in 1919, Yugoslavia was again a land of reconciliation after tremendous civil and liberation war. The new army took some of the officers who had returned from German captivity (2,016), 1,963 officers of Independent State of Croatia (Domobranstvo), 215 from German army, 322 from Bulgarian army, 124 from Italian army 18 from Hungarian army, 4 from Albanian fascist militia, 727 from General Mihailovic’s troops and 17 Royal officers who had escaped to the Middle East in 1941. The process of reception began on the larger scale in late 1944, and was accelerated in the spring of 1945. It is interesting to note that the Croat group still included many of former k.u.k. officers. Such was for example the Chief of new the Air Force, General Pirc, and Chief of Military Intelligence and member of the Supreme Command in late spring of 1945. General Vjekoslav Klirani.\(^{13}\)

Former Yugoslavia was multiethnic society, and that has always been in a special concern of its rulers at the time.\(^{14}\)

Without going into details, suffice it to say that there is no evidence in sources, which can confirm any chauvinistic attitude or intention of the Serbian decision-makers in military hierarchy of the inter-war period. On the contrary, many top secret orders by the War minister to the upper commanders or whole officer corps show that they were fully aware that harmony and loyalty among different elements and satisfied citizens are the main preconditions of the combat moral. They were also fully aware that every mistake in that respect would nourish anti-Serb or anti-Yugoslav propaganda by opponents to the new Kingdom.\(^{15}\)

In spite of many political claims at the time that former k.u.k. officers were neglected in the common army, figures suggest more profound conclusions. Absence of non-Serb Generals or the small number of them in the period between 1923-1935 cannot be taken as the only proof for negligence towards those officers by Serbian military authorities. For example, at the beginning of 1920s former k.u.k. officers formed 36.76% out of the officer corps (6.800), in 1924 they had been only 9.7% of Colonels, 15.8% of Lieutenant colonels and 42.2% of Majors and only 4 of Generals and Admirals. Twelve years later (1936), they were 6.5% of the General corps, 33.35% of Colonels, 34.66 of Lieutenant colonels and 47.76% of Majors (among pre-war officers, newly promoted Yugoslav officers excluded). On the eve of the W.W.II there were 23% in active General corps.

Yugoslav communist party, or more precisely its top brass, brought into socialist Yugoslavia much of its political heritage from previous times. They were of the opinion that the main problem in the pre-war army had been domination of Serbian Generals, as well as the alleged Serbian hegemony in general. Consequently, they concluded that the problem of legitimacy in multiethnic society would be overcome by appropriate representation of non-Serbs among Generals and officer corps in general. However, they faced the same or similar problems, as their royal predecessors. Non balance caused by commanding structure of the partisan Army, and after 1950 absence of interest for military schools in already less represented nations, steadily repeated undesirable national proportions in officer corps. Thus the Serbs who were 36.30% of the Yugoslav population formed approximately 57.17% of officer corps. However among Generals their share was 46% and they held only 33% of the highest posts. If compared to the Croats who were in the same time (1971) 22% of the population, 14% of officer corps, 19% of General Corps
but 38% of highest post, it can be seen that it was much more easier for a non-Serb to be promoted to the highest ranks and posts.\textsuperscript{16}

Regarding both elites, we can identify some similarities. The most obvious ones deal with modernization. Firstly, the army officer corps is a channel for vertical social mobility allowing individuals of modest or lower social origin (sons of: peasants, workers, lower rank clerks etc) to achieve a social promotion into prestige, to become a part of the well off or even politically decision making elite. The second one is the influence on a developing military and other basic or supplement industry, railroads, ports, water supplies (pipes, reservoirs etc), energy systems, mines etc. Painful experience of W.W.I, and problems in obtaining enough supplies before W.W.II, contributed to the developing of Yugoslavia's own military-industrial complex. That complex became at the end of SFY, an impressive one employing 80,000 workers (strictly military factories), and affecting also many complementary industries of various kinds. The arms export in last decades made income of 1,5-2 billion \$ per year, a sum much higher or equal to that of tourism.\textsuperscript{17}

Both elites, involved in creation or liberation and enlargement of Yugoslavia, were highly motivated in their defense and survival. According to our present knowledge, that basic motif made them firm supporters of the rulers (Alexander I and Tito) in the moments when Yugoslavia faced foreign threats. Rulers could also count on them when they wanted to impose radical solutions in internal politics, especially when crisis endangered and undermined stability and unity of Yugoslavia and consequently sapped country's defense strength (1929, 1971).

Both elites, because they had experienced war sufferings, were keen on maintaining the peace in the region and around the world. According to our knowledge, which is more profound of the inter-war period, there were no war plans except for defense. Offensive plans against Hungary would be put into force only in case Hungary attacked any of Yugoslav allies from Little Entente, or Yugoslavia itself. Plans for operations in northern Albania would be put into practice only in a case of confrontation with Italian army in Albania. Exception was the preparation of operation within limited range on near border territory of Bulgaria in 1930 to settle the problem of VMRO terrorism and after too many assassinations and attacks committed by that organization. Yugoslavia had the right to undertake such an action according the League of Nations' Pact. However that plan was abandoned in early 1931.

Next exception, was the case of preparations for sending military assistance to General Marcos during the Greek civil war (1948). A complete Division had been prepared to cross the border in a region of Bitolj and take part on his side. However Yugoslav leaders or Tito himself gave up the plan because of the changed circumstances (aggravation in relationship with USSR).

Still, there are some differences between those military elites, too. Since 1903 certain tendency had existed among the groups of Serbian officers to take an active part in politics in an unconstitutional way during internal or international crises. They also had a propensity to act as "praetorians". That heritage came into Yugoslav Army, and finally caused the Coup d'état on 27. March 1941.

However, according to the results of our research, we can state that no doctrinal militarism existed in Yugoslavia. In general, elite "cadre", was in favour of democracy and healthy political life which would provide satisfied citizens, future combatants. As for the elite "nucleus", usually identified as "White hand" or King's military "entourage" it can be said that they acted sometimes in their own selfish interest.\textsuperscript{18} For example, in spite of predominant democratic orientation of officer corps, during long political crisis in 1924, some very influential officers worked in private interest in cahoots with corrupted
ministers. On the eve of King's "Coup d'Etat" in 1929, they were busy, too. After King's death, Regent Prince Paul had tried to remove them from the Army, and almost succeeded after 1936.

In communist Yugoslavia, in Tito's era, military elite was rather an object (a tool) then an active subject which created politics in spite of legal possibilities for exercising influence through the bodies of LCY (Central Comity or Presidency) or through the post of the Defense Minister. The revolutionary multinational army, and its elite, was transformed into exclusive, professional, supranational "Yugoslav" institution that was almost hermetically sealed off from the rest of the Yugoslav society. Defense Secretary General Go•njak (1953-1967) and his closed associates were responsible for military affairs only to Tito. Nothing, or very little, has changed in the period of Go•njak's successor General Ljubi i. The old partisan guard was still devoted to Tito, and was prepared to carry out the task which he had given to them in late 1971, i.e. to be "ultimate guarantor of the Yugoslav state and Communist system."

This general remark must be supplemented by some data on certain exceptions. Behind the curtain, far away from the eyes of public, usually kind of rivalry among the top brass existed. The causes were of different kinds, from political or ideological to strictly military ones. Sometimes Generals were accused of being puppets of political wirepullers from without army. Such things we can follow since 1948, when two prominent Generals Arso Jovanovi and Branko Petri evi, along with a certain number of Colonels, opposed to the Tito and the majority of the Officer corps in quarrel with Stalin. The cases of Generals (Serbs) Miloje Milojevi, Radivoje Jovanovi and Velimir Terzi in early 1960s testified for the first time to the existence of national question or different approaches to it. The cases of Generals Pavel Jak, Radovan Vukanovi, Rade Hamovi were of military doctrinal type. However, after 1967 and 1968 and especially after retirement of many prominent partisans' cadre we can identify first cracks in the army unity. The culmination of that process in Tito's era took place during the "Croatian spring" in 1971. Some 13 Generals (Croats) gave support to the political leadership of Croatia and new nationalistic tendencies. Finally, in the mid of 1970s, Tito retired some Generals close to his wife Jovanka, accused of disloyalty, in spite of their merits during National Liberation War and afterwards. However Tito increasingly relied on the Army, until his death.

In a fact, some analysts claim, that "in the mid-1960s, party reformers feared that this isolation of the military could mean a future 'militaristic' threat to wide ranging economic and political reforms introduced in Yugoslavia at the time. They sought, with considerable success, to dilute the exclusiveness of the military establishment. The reformers forced on the YPA an 'opening to society' (as process was termed in Yugoslavia) after 1966."

However secret clashes between streams in elite of YPA cannot be correctly judged if the efforts from the outside are neglected. Tito has wavered from one side to another, but has always managed to win support of his war comrades declaring himself in favour of Yugoslav unity. For this reason the majority remained loyal to him in spite of everything.

Finally, for better understanding of real position and prestige of Tito's Generals in a rather poor communist society (in 1950s and 1960s) it has to be said that General's rank bore some privileges such as comfortable housing (big flats or villas), official cars for private use (up to 1962), and motor boats on the Adriatic, credits for buying private cars in 1960s, good salaries (equal to those of the nomenclature), holidays in Army hotels or villas etc. In mid 1970s federal military social security was established (pensions and health insurance). That facility improved status of many retired army officers and their families, even Generals. Thus, thousands were received "with open arms by YPA and federal Center" again. For Generals that meant pensions almost equal to the salaries of the same rank in active service (especially for holders of "Spomenica 1941"), right to medical
treatment in military hospitals (separate rooms and the best care) and winter and summer vacations in military hotels at the seaside or in the mountains.

Footnotes


4. Spomenica Vojne akademije, 1925.


8. Deak, p. 91, 194

10. Opta rang lista oficira Kraljevine SHS/Jugoslavije za 1924, Beograd, 1924 (also for 1927, 1932, 1937). The Navy had separately lists. These lists were no publicly available in pre-war Yugoslavia, and today access to them is only possible in the Military Archives.


14. Yugoslav experience with multi ethnic army during seven decades will be discussed much more thoroughly in forthcoming article "Die jugoslawische Erfahrung mit der multihnischen Armee 1918-1991" by this author in review "Sudosteupora", which will come out soon.


16. B. Denitch, p.115

17. Dr Milorad Dragojevi (General), Razvoj naoru anja u SFRJ u makazama ideologije i politike, (out of his forthcoming book "Tiina zvona"), Politika, November 23 - December 14, 1996.


21. One very famous YPA General, member of Central Committee of LCY and participant at the time on it's famous Brioni's 4th session (1966), confided to his close friend: "I cried. I felt that the end of Yugoslavia had begun." But he remained on the post and did not resign.