

# US Intelligence Community Estimates on Yugoslavia (1948-1991)

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The author considers the relationship of the United States toward the former Yugoslavia, based on declassified documents (1948-1991) of the American intelligence agency. The US showed no particular interest in Yugoslavia after 1945, considering it a reliable Soviet ally. When the conflict broke out between Stalin and Tito in 1948, it was believed that a Soviet military intervention against Yugoslavia was probable and that there was a possibility of American military assistance to Yugoslavia. In the mid-50s, it was evaluated that in the event of an armed conflict between the western and eastern blocs, the Yugoslav army could be relied upon as a Western ally. During the 1960s, American analyses became more critical of Yugoslav foreign policy, which was in open contradiction to Western interests (non-aligned movement, relationship toward the Israeli-Arab war). During the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, American policy proposes a "very cautious and well-calculated" position toward post-Tito Yugoslavia, with America avoiding any kind of leading role or hasty initiatives. Evaluations of the internal situation in Yugoslavia grow with the creation of a unified Yugoslavia (which is in American interests), to the total disintegration of the country (the most dangerous scenario being the eventual outbreak of armed conflict, which would be halted with the introduction of Soviet troops into the eastern parts of former Yugoslavia and western troops into Slovenia and Croatia). American analyses do not lose sight of the fact that the regime in Belgrade is repressive, especially in its relations with Croatia and Kosovo, but conclude that the "Belgrade policies, while not ideal, serve western interests."

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, there appeared a unique opportunity to access a great number of intelligence reports and analyses of the two superpowers. The disintegration of the USSR made it possible to release many analytical materials of the KGB from the recent past. On the other hand, certain collections of documents of the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council and the US State Department are regularly disclosed in Washington under the Freedom of Information

Act, Presidential Executive Order 12958 (April 17, 1995), owing to the efforts of the "Moynihan" parliamentary commission. The access to original new documents has provided the professional community the chance to achieve a more accurate understanding of many issues and to find answers to the long-standing discussions concerning the essence and reliability of intelligence analyses as well as the adequacy of the analytic methods.<sup>2</sup>

In many intelligence reports and analyses of the CIA and the US National Security Council, the situation in the Balkans and in the Mediterranean region is considered. Surprisingly, instead of problems of the Balkan NATO allies or members of the Warsaw Pact, Yugoslavia is most often mentioned. This article is based predominantly on newly released documents of the CIA, NSC, DIA and the US State Department Intelligence & Research Division, which were declassified between March 1992 and September 1998. Although in brief form, the document presentation provides the possibility for studying the evolution of the US intelligence concepts and estimates concerning post-war Yugoslavia.

## The Stalin-Tito Conflict

The three day long Kremlin bargaining between Stalin and Churchill and their foreign ministers Molotov and Eden in October 1944, which led to the well-known "percentage agreement" on the Balkans, allotted to Yugoslavia a balanced position with both of the Great Powers having equal influence. During the first post-war years, the USA and Great Britain demonstrated no great interest concerning the position of Tito's Yugoslavia, which contrasted with their ongoing interest in the course of events in Poland and Czechoslovakia. In most diplomatic and intelligence reports related to the period before 1948, the cabinet of Josip Broz Tito is regarded as the closest ally of the Soviet Union and as a "standard" Stalinist communist type regime in East Europe. The attention of the leading circles in the United States to Yugoslavia increases considerably only when the conflict between Stalin and Tito is openly acknowledged at the end of June, 1948.

Donald Heath, the American ambassador in Sofia, uses a figurative historical comparison - "a Protestant revolt against the communist Vatican"<sup>3</sup> - when commenting on the sudden break of relations between the two most closely-linked East European countries in his report to Washington, dated June 30. On the same day in a cipher message, the US Military and Naval Attaches in Belgrade first posed the question of the need for American military support of Tito against a possible Soviet attack.<sup>4</sup> Several days later, the first confidential American-Yugoslav probe on the possibility of a military collaboration takes place.<sup>5</sup>

In their first information after the beginning of the Stalin-Tito conflict, the Western secret services focus their attention upon the probability of an outbreak of a military conflict in the Balkans as the result of a possible Soviet attack on Yugoslavia. From the onset of the Soviet-Yugoslav crisis, the US military experts closely watch the course of events and analyze the alternatives that might convert the political controversy into a local war. In a report, submitted to the US National Security Council on November 17, 1949, four possible options of eventual Soviet actions are enumerated. In a separate position, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staffs formally poses the question of providing military support to the Tito regime "since without our considerable support we cannot expect him to achieve a success" against a Soviet invasion.<sup>6</sup> In another memorandum of the American Army Intelligence Agency dated September 1950, it is noted that: "In case of an attack on Yugoslavia the United States must be prepared to give military support, eventually participating with their own forces (underlined by the author) in the hypothetical military conflict."<sup>7</sup> This completely new stage in the Balkan policy of the American administration is perhaps influenced by the outbreak of the Korean war. In subsequent CIA reports, dated March 20 and May 4, 1951, and military intelligence reports, dated September 24 of the same year, the US experts still estimate as "serious" the probability of a Soviet attack on Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> At the same time Washington and Belgrade publicly announce the contents of an agreement between the two governments concerning American military support. The agreement is signed on November 14, 1951.

## Yugoslavia in NATO?

The exchange of messages relating to support of Tito, which occurred between General Omar Bradley and the supreme commander-in-chief of the NATO allied forces in Europe, General Dwight Eisenhower, is of interest. In a letter to "Ike" Eisenhower from September 4, 1951, General Bradley notes: "We feel that the plan for helping Yugoslavia is eventually a NATO matter." In a new letter, dated September 19, general Bradley insists on two-party discussions with representatives of the leading countries in the pact "to the development of emergency plans for giving direct military support to Yugoslavia with such forces and facilities as the United Kingdom, France and Italy may agree to make available to planning purposes, in addition to those US forces of which you are aware."<sup>9</sup> Later it is assumed that political discussions in NATO on the Yugoslav problem may meet with difficulty with some countries, members of the Pact; therefore, it is suggested that the providing of military support should be negotiated on a three-party basis with Great Britain and France. Fears that taking a relevant decision in the matter might be blocked are reasonable. A year

later, at a session of the NATO Council in Paris, the Italian representative De Gasperi firmly rejects the idea to discuss the proposed NATO membership of Yugoslavia. (His principal motive is certainly the continuing Italian-Yugoslav territorial problem of Trieste). Nevertheless, in the Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area (December 9, 1952) it is clearly emphasized that:

“Yugoslavia is the only “lapsed satellite”, which, though not a member of NATO, is likely to join in a defensive war against the Soviet Bloc and thus afford the Allies considerable psychological advantage as well as some military aid.”<sup>10</sup>

At that time, the role of the Balkans in a future European war is closely linked with the coordination of the actions of the Yugoslav, Greek and Turkish armies, which finds practical expression in the creation of the Balkan Pact in 1953. As early as 1951, such joint military operations are the topic of bilateral and multilateral consultations. In a strictly confidential telegram from the US embassy in Athens, for instance, the opinion of the Greek prime minister, Sophokles Veniselos, is quoted: “Should war break out he believes both Greek and Yugoslav armies would move into Albania in coordinated fashion in order to remove this threat to their rear.”<sup>11</sup>

The military collaboration with Yugoslavia remains on the agenda even after the normalization of Soviet-Yugoslav relations and the meeting between Tito and Khrushchev in Belgrade at the end of May 1955. In 1956 and 1957, the Pentagon chiefs still include the country in their lists for the providing of military support.<sup>12</sup> The total military aid to Yugoslavia between 1950 and 1957 amounts to 745 million dollars.<sup>13</sup> In a Defense Department report to the National Security Council, dated September 22, 1958, it is explicitly stated that: “Our strongest Allies in the European area are our NATO Allies. Armed forces of the NATO countries and those of Spain and Yugoslavia are impressive in size”.<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of the sixties, the analyses of CIA become more critical, as the fear became more pronounced in the evaluating of Yugoslavia as a leader of the Movement of the Non-aligned Nations. The foreign policy of Yugoslavia clearly conflicts with the policies of the Western countries, especially during the Israeli-Arab war of 1967. At the same time it is pointed out in many intelligence analyses that the propaganda attacks do not weaken Tito’s pragmatic efforts to extract benefits for his country from the global duel confrontation of the Cold-War period. For instance, in the CIA National Intelligence Estimate (May 23, 1961) it is mentioned that:

“The Yugoslavs, however, have refrained from formal relations of alliance with the Western Powers, and the Balkan Pact with

Greece and Turkey, negotiated in 1953-1954 when a threat from the Bloc still seemed serious, has become virtually moribund. Belgrade nevertheless does not altogether dispense with the connection because it provides certain advantages in the relations with these two countries and because the pact stands as a form of insurance against a future revival of strong Bloc measures against Yugoslavia. It is also a form of indirect contact with the Western defense system, which might one day be useful to Yugoslavia, even though its political line now condemns NATO."<sup>15</sup>

During the sixties the Western intelligence services pay more attention to the manifestation of ethnic separatism and to the conflict within the party (between "the old" and "the young" cadres) in Yugoslavia. Anti-Yugoslav incidents in Kosovo-Metohia (Kosmet) and the "infiltration" of Albanians into that region are reported first. In a CIA report on the "Yugoslav experiment", considerable space is dedicated to ethnic and national problems:

"It is an immutable fact of Yugoslav political life that most Serbs and Croats and Slovenes and Macedonians think of themselves first as Serbs or Croats or Slovenes or Macedonians and second, if at all, as Yugoslavs. National and ethnic rivalries are endemic; they have long constituted a centrifugal force which cannot long be overcome through liaisons intended to resolve economic or political issues. Fears of a return to "greater Serb" hegemony haunt all Yugoslavs except the Serbs; some Croats and Slovenians speak earnestly of a complete secession which no central government could tolerate; and less drastic attacks on the federal concept come from all regions."

At the same time the CIA experts are inclined to give better prospects to the living standards and the future federal development of the country, even after the possible death of the symbol of Yugoslav unity, Tito:

"We believe that, over the long term, the principal accomplishments of the Yugoslav system are fairly secure, that Yugoslavia, even without Tito, will survive essentially intact and will persist as a hybrid system. We also think, however, that change and disarray will continue to confront the leadership - especially the post-Tito leadership - with a variety of serious problems."<sup>16</sup>

In the days that followed the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, Western military, diplomatic and intelligence experts discuss again the need for urgent political and military aid in the case of a hypothetical Soviet attack on Romania and Yugoslavia. In spite of the fact that the American diplomatic agencies in East Europe submit information that: "we have no evidence pointing specifically to preparation for action against Romania and Yugoslavia," attention is placed on consolidating contacts and coordination with the Western countries in talks between Tito and other Yugoslav leaders with American politicians

and diplomats.<sup>17</sup> In a memorandum dated October 1, 1968, which was prepared by the US State Department, the possible forms of political, economic and military support to Yugoslavia are listed. In the document it is explicitly noted that:

“We should be prepared to engage in military support operations for Yugoslavia under these circumstances:

- (1) Only if requested by the Yugoslavs;
- (2) No involvement of US or NATO personnel beyond participation in delivery operations;
- (3) Heavy equipment of a type requiring considerable lead time for delivery should not be provided;
- (4) If portable, relatively easily deliverable equipment can be furnished at any stage of hostilities, we should take all necessary steps to grant it;
- (5) The Yugoslav military genius is in guerrilla-type operations. We should orient our assistance in that direction.”<sup>18</sup>

The opportunities for American support are discussed in detail at a meeting between US President Lyndon Johnson with the Yugoslav deputy Prime minister, Kiro Gligorov, on October 4, 1968. After his visit to Ljubljana in January 1969, the American consul in Zagreb provides the opinion of the Slovenian leaders, Kraiger and Brajnik, “that Yugoslavia and the US have a strong mutual interest in thwarting the linked Soviet moves and, similarly, that the US, in considering how to cope with increased tension created by the Soviets in North Central Europe, should not lose sight of Yugoslavia’s needs due to Soviet-created tension in the Balkans.”<sup>19</sup>

## Post - Tito Yugoslavia

For many years before the death of the aging Yugoslav leader Tito, American experts study in detail the possible “post-Tito” evolution of the country. In a long 66-page Memorandum of the National Security Council (September 13, 1971) the possible options of the US policy in “post-Tito Yugoslavia are considered.”<sup>20</sup> One of the most important recommendations is that a very cautious and considered line of conduct should be followed. This is characteristic for the American policy with respect to Yugoslavia throughout the whole period until 1992:

“The extent of US involvement must be carefully gauged at each step so that we do not through our own actions push the Yugoslavs in directions not in their ultimate best interest. We must be mindful that even a limited input from outside Yugoslavia at a key moment in a time of instability could have a crucial impact on the evolution of events and the develop-

ment of Yugoslav policy. Accordingly, our efforts in the main should be supplementary and reinforcing, not leading."

Particular areas of future bilateral collaboration based upon Yugoslavia's significance for the protection of American interests in this part of Europe are considered in the document. Trade expansion, new American investments and credits, continuing collaboration in science and technology as well as intelligence and defense collaboration (including admittance of Yugoslav army officers into American military academies) and other extremely important aspects of national security are among these areas. The useful exchange of intelligence information about the Warsaw Pact forces and plans in the Balkans is mentioned in particular. Concerning the contacts of the secret services, it is explicitly noted in the report that: "As the transition period approaches in Yugoslavia, however, it could prove useful to have established channels for intelligence exchange. To establish such channels we could respond tentatively to the Yugoslav initiatives, and further explore the possibility of developing a mutually beneficial exchange."

The US intelligence and military experts analyze four possibilities for the future evolution of Yugoslavia, three of them including a partial or total disintegration of the country, mainly the secession of Slovenia, Croatia, Vojvodina, Kosovo and Macedonia. In addition to declaring their support for the preservation of Yugoslavia's integrity, the American experts expect (as an ultimate measure) the possible use of US and NATO forces with the purpose of restoring "the strategic balance" in Europe. In the different cases, it is recommended that the leaders in Zagreb and Ljubljana be advised to restrain from the application of "secessionist plans" which might endanger the stability of Yugoslavia. The most dangerous scenario considered includes a direct military confrontation, which leads to the division of parts of Yugoslavia between the two military and political blocs, the direction of division expressing the priorities and differences in the attitude of the West towards particular Yugoslav republics:

"...The Soviets move troops into Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro. In the Security Council we would demand the dispatch of UN forces to Slovenia and Croatia, trying to force this action by making clear that in the absence of UN efforts, the US and NATO would have no recourse but to take steps to guarantee the continued independence and Western orientation of Croatia and Slovenia. In the absence of UN action, we would move into the two northern republics."

Similar such estimates as those in the report dated September 13, 1971, can be found in CIA intelligence reports dated July 5, 1973, September 25, 1979, and February 1, 1980. In the 1973 analysis, special attention is paid to the crisis in Belgrade - Zagreb

relations, which had been overcome only by taking draconian measures (repressive actions against more than 800 Croatian functionaries). The general conclusion motivating the position of the West is that: "Over the years, NATO members have in one way or another invested heavily in Yugoslavia... It is generally agreed that while not ideal, Belgrade's position and policies are advantageous to Western interests..."<sup>21</sup> In the intelligence analysis from 1979, serious ethnic and political problems in Yugoslavia in the eighties are predicted.

"Of crucial importance is the interplay among a number of central variables, of which the most critical will be the nature of Soviet initiatives and reactions, the efficacy of Western assistance, and, above all, the cohesion and adaptability of Tito's successors".

Authors of the document remind us of the serious ethnic unrest in Kosovo and Croatia in the past decade. Relevant to Kosovo, Albanian accusations are quoted that the province has been converted into "an economic and political colony of the Serbs." The experts of CIA underline the existence of two hostile fractions in the Yugoslav leadership, but do not regard as realistic the possibility of a military putsch or a drastic change in the country's policies. As for the position of the Western countries, the analysis points out that:

"No amount or kind of Western support can stop Tito's successors from engaging in a self-destructive succession struggle or prevent Yugoslavia's constituent nationalities from embarking on a civil war, if they are determined to do so. However, skillfully timed and carefully designed and orchestrated Western support could make a very large difference to the consolidation and survival of a potentially viable post-Tito leadership and thereby to the preservation of a stable regional, continental and global balance of power."<sup>22</sup>

Within the framework of the continuing Bloc confrontation, CIA and DIA in their expert analyses underline the role and position of Yugoslavia in the case of a possible global conflict. In several successive CIA analyses entitled "Warsaw Pact Forces Opposite NATO" it is explicitly noted that: "...We judge it unlikely that Yugoslavia would grant the Pact permission to use its territory or that the Pact would use force to advance through Yugoslavia to attack northern Italy. This judgment is qualified, however, by our uncertainty concerning future political attitudes and development in Yugoslavia in the post-Tito era."<sup>23</sup>

After Tito's death, the situation in Yugoslavia and the future fate of the country are the subject of investigations and discussions in many research centers connected with US defense and intelligence agencies, such as RAND Corporation, the US Army War College, the Naval Academy, etc. Within several months after the

death of the leader, approximately ten reports related to Yugoslavia were prepared.<sup>24</sup>

The CIA analysis, dated January 26, 1983, and the analysis of the National Security Council (March 14, 1984) are particularly troublesome. Detailed estimates of the financial, political and ethnic crises in Yugoslavia after Tito's death are provided in the reports. In the CIA report (1983) concerning the increasingly strained ethnic relations it is noted that:

"Confrontations among the ethno-national communities have been a recurrent feature of postwar Yugoslav history and sometimes forced even Tito on the defensive. Economic stringencies are sharpening the conflict of interest among Yugoslavia's republics and provinces. Following Tito's death, the federal regime lost the prestige it derived as a result of his dominant authority and unimpeachable reputation as an ethnic nonpartisan. None of his successors has an even remotely comparable reputation."

In the report, the strained ethnic relations in Croatia and Bosnia are particularly noted. Special attention is paid to the "strategic significance" of the ethnic unrest of the Albanians in Kosovo in 1981. Nevertheless, a firm position is expressed that Western countries should continue their considerable financial and economic support to the federal government (2,4 billion dollars) with the purpose of overcoming the aggravated economic crisis.<sup>25</sup> American policy with respect to Yugoslavia is discussed in a Memorandum of the National Security Council (August 10, 1989) at the end of the Cold War era.<sup>26</sup>

## After the Fall of the Berlin Wall

The intensification of ethnic conflicts based upon increasingly insurmountable disagreements concerning the "federation or self-determination" dilemma, as well as the unknown fate of another multinational country, the USSR, paralyzed American initiatives for a short time at the beginning of the nineties. The position of the leading countries predetermined in many respects the development of the Yugoslav crisis after 1991, thus converting it into the bleeding wound of Europe. Many American experts, Professor Daniel Nelson, for instance, warned that the Balkan Peninsula is connected with "the future of European security" more closely than any other part of Eastern Europe because of the preconditions for numerous internal and international conflicts which were laid in the past.<sup>27</sup> The motives for the disengaged position of the Western institutions at the first stage of the Yugo-conflict are summed up in one of the expert analyses in the following manner:

- (a) The conflict, at least at the beginning, is of internal significance and is located "outside the NATO space";

- (b) The conflict opposes the principle of self-determination in favor of the idea of the inviolability of European boundaries;
- (c) The outbreak of the conflict is at a time of NATO reorientation;
- (d) The conflict and any international response to it are regarded as a test for future ethnic and national conflicts in Europe. The principle of precedent is considered a serious consideration at the time of disintegration of one of superpowers, the USSR;
- (e) The conflict manifests the differences in the geopolitical orientation of the leading Western countries.<sup>28</sup>

It was added in other analyses that the position of NATO and the European Community is influenced predominantly by the political line of the United States, which aimed at preserving Yugoslav federal integrity due to its fears that otherwise, there would be "an impetus to the USSR disintegration."<sup>29</sup>

In 1992, the United States increased its activity and more and more often the question of dispatching American forces to the Balkans and conducting special military operations was addressed on a government level. In 1992-1993, different options of military operations on the territory of previous Yugoslavia were discussed. For instance, in the summary report of the US Congress, military expert John Collins listed eight different possibilities:

- A. Withdrawal of the UN peace-making forces because it is impossible to solve the problem by a military intervention;
- B. Preserving the status quo;
- C. Conducting peace-making missions by the peaceful efforts of military forces;
- D. Humanitarian actions in compliance with Resolution 770 of the UN Security Council;
- E. Actions for "isolating the battlefield" by air blockade, economic sanctions and arms embargo;
- F. Retaliation operations with bombing of important military and industrial targets;
- G. Forced peace-making actions aimed at separating the participants in the armed conflict;
- H. A modified version of the previous option by expelling the Serbian and Croatian forces from Bosnia and Herzegovina and restoration of the pre-war boundaries.<sup>30</sup>

The events which followed proved that most influential options presented in the intelligence and political expert reports find concrete expression in the American policies related to the Yugo-crisis: peace-making operations, humanitarian actions, embargo, air blockade, air attacks of the NATO forces against military and civilian targets, at first in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and at present against the territories of Serbia and Montenegro.

The Yugo-crisis was a springboard for a great number of new serious economic, military, and political problems for the Balkan countries and Europe as a whole, as well as for the world community. The ethno-religious and territorial controversies which have been for decades impossible to overcome define at present the military and political situation in the Balkans as a “permanent crisis”, with a trend toward long-term instability of the peninsula due to these centers of instability.

## NOTES

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