

Oppression, Equality, and Mental Health: Communism and Goli Otok in Yugoslavia

By Mia Milosevic

Abstract: Oppression, equality, and mental health hold an undeniable relationship that can be investigated through Yugoslavia's era of communism. A specific relationship and pattern between oppression, equality, and mental health can be observed within this era—one that is a direct result of civilian neglect in communist Yugoslavia. Deviations of this pattern can be denoted in both similar and different contexts, and the ultimate result is dependent on the leaders of a nation or region that have the power to enforce the aforementioned relationships.

The deliberate oppression of society inevitably results in oppression of the mind. This paper investigates how the act of consciously suppressing developmental growth on a cognitive level disrupts the stability of a given populace's mental health. It will also explore the relationships between equality, oppression, and mental health through various case studies. Through the scope of Yugoslavia's history, equality—in order to be fully achieved—necessitated a basis built upon oppression. It is under this limiting foundation that equality and oppression became one, and it is through this unity that Yugoslavia's society could become incapable of achieving mental health as a cohesive society—a concept of which is seemingly enforced by the remnants of communistic brutality. Former Yugoslav civilians who bore witness to their government's form of communism and the psychological conspiracy of Goli Otok lived in an oppressed society. The severity of their experiences under a communist regime, of whom eventually used psychological tactics to mentally sway their civilians into equality, had the capacity to render the Yugoslav population psychologically oppressed. Their detachment from mental stability urged much of the Yugoslav population to deviate from satisfactory mental innovation, and fall painfully into a limited mode of mental growth.

Following the conclusion of WWII, the supreme leader of Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, Marshal Tito, took a drastic political maneuver away from "hard line" communism, severing his ties with Stalin and the Soviet Union in order to usher his country into an unparalleled openness (Yurtoğlu). Yugoslavia's unsteady departure from the increasingly tyrannical Soviets ironically provoked the most authoritarian and Stalinist political episode in the nation's history (Antic). In fear of popular defection to the Soviets, the Yugoslav regime embarked on a purge of its most esteemed cadres. Thousands of civilians ended in political prisons, and the regime implemented their program of "re-education" for all former civilians who failed to understand the "true meaning" behind Yugoslavia's split from Soviet communism. Several "re-education" camps were established, the most notorious of them being Goli Otok, where brutal psychological treatments were conducted. The psychological suppression facilitated by Tito's regime gave rise to a large population of Yugoslav civilians who became incapable of free thought, denoting the interrelation between equality and oppression.

Richard Blanco's "Looking for the Gulf Motel" can be used as a comprehensive model for which the mental downfall of Yugoslav prisoners can be outlined. The poem begins with the immigration of a hopeful Cuban family, searching for an improved life to claim for themselves. The children in the family become deliberately detached from their culture due to societal pressure, and eventually return to the remains of their native culture with an augmented outlook, or mind. Similarly, Yugoslav prisoners who were previously attached to their native home were torn from their traditional values and forced to proceed with the hopeful changes of Tito's regime in accordance with governmental terms. Upon emerging from the re-education prisons, Yugoslav prisoners returned to their native land with an entirely new mindset. Each stanza of

Blanco's poem begins with "there should be nothing here I don't remember" which grants a psychological intrigue to the poem as it further integrates the forgottenness of their previous life, which is also exemplified in the Yugoslav prisoners who were forced to neglect their previous values. Though the characters within Blanco's poem do not outline the experiences of Yugoslav civilians, the structure of their journey provides an exemplary model with which the Yugoslav prisoners' journeys can be better understood. Yugoslavia's mimic of Blanco's structure and the integrated relationship between oppression and equality can be corroborated by Dragoslav Mihailovic's "Goli Otok" and Ana Antic's "The Pedagogy of Workers' Self Management." The Yugoslav government ripped civilians who disagreed with the policy of the Soviet Union from their homes and placed them into reform prisons. Many of the approximately fifty thousand men and women who passed through these camps died there or soon after their release, and "all the survivors carried lifelong scars from their traumatic experience" (Mihailovic). According to Mihailovic, a survivor of Goli Otok, the inmates were subjected to a genuine reign of terror, consisting of beatings, deprivations, constant pressure to confess wrongdoings, and psychological torture surpassing infamous chambers of death such as the Soviet gulag. The tactics used by Tito's regime to suppress the minds of Yugoslav prisoners belittled these civilians in ways that far transcended mental differentiation. The regime's deliberate use of heinous oppression to unify the minds of their deviants left the affected populace single-minded and mentally unstable. Although Antic has a different perspective from Mihailovic on the tactics used by Goli Otok reformers, the ultimate goal and result remain the same. According to Antic, Goli Otok was unique in that "it was centrally shaped by a host of psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic concepts and practices that guided Goli Otok's project of

personal evaluation on both individual and group levels” (Antic). In fact, the Yugoslav prison camp placed emphasis on psychotherapeutic techniques that seemed to be particularly interested in introspection, self-exploration, and self-knowledge. The inclusion of Westernized forms of mental development seemed to promote a gradual mental shift that simultaneously promoted free thought, which contradicts Mihailovic’s depiction of immediacy. Although Goli Otok’s reform system, as stated by Antic, used methods of psychotherapeutic analyses to allow an individual to delve further within their own mind, they failed to exclude what was their main goal: to unify the mindsets of their civilians under an oppressive regime. Despite Westernized reforms that promoted introspection and even self-improvement, the dominating presence of Tito’s regime was able to succeed in unifying the minds of the prisoners in accordance with the rest of the Yugoslav population. The question ultimately returns to: how does oppression yield mental instability? Through the eyes of Antic, it can be conclusively stated that the direct path to Yugoslav prisoners’ mental instability was “self-exploration, which went hand in hand with physical torture and brutally harsh labor” (Antic). Although Antic’s and Mihailovic’s perspectives slightly differ, their documentations of mental oppression within Goli Otok both include the use of oppression and detachment in order to achieve equal mindedness.

The notion of equality does not always mean to achieve mental unification in a population. The yearning for equality can also seek to change the status of a certain people to be in line with another. This is something Tito did not seek to achieve, as his form of communism and prison camps sought to unify minds, and not bodies. Through this context, oppression and equality may not hold the dual relationship as previously mentioned, and the pursuit of equality may therefore not result in mental instability. Alexandra Hrycak’s “Coping with Chaos” serves

as a case study to this counterclaim. Her paper specifically investigates feminist-inspired activism and advocacy under a communist regime in Ukraine, uniting the alternative definition of equality and oppression. Similar to Yugoslavia, Ukraine fell victim to an oppressive regime that suppressed civilian deviation. During the Soviet era, Ukraine was subjected to the maternalist gender regime common to state socialist countries. Despite state claims that women and men were equal, “women’s advancement...continued to be blocked by the discriminatory beliefs [of the communist regime]” (Hrycak). Despite movements to achieve female equality in the workplace and in politics during this period, “the splintering in the ranks of the reformers and the co-optation of civic activists permitted the state to ignore women’s interests” (Hrycak). Soviet leaders had shed light on the importance of women’s activism but did nothing to achieve it, prioritizing maternalist activities. The failure of civilians to increase action in favor of women’s activism would hinder the self-worth and self-depiction of women in Ukraine for years to come. Hrycak’s investigation denotes that oppression, regardless of the definition of equality, yields detrimental effects to the mental health or stability of a given population. Ultimately, the presence of oppression, regardless of motive, has the potential to render a society mentally unstable. Conversely, the absence of oppression may not diminish the positive motives for equality, which will be further inquired.

For the sake of specificity, this paper will explore the effect and growth of communism solely under the dictatorship of Marshal Tito. Tito promoted the unity, equality, and nationalism of the Slavic people residing within Yugoslavia. To suppress the diverse and competing ethnicities within the nation, Tito squandered all ethnic risings. Frequently through his speeches Tito would tout the strength of Yugoslav nationalism and talk of the future potential for his

country in order to maintain order. His Communist Ruling Party advocated national equality and a federal Yugoslavia in their propaganda. Tito's form of communism serves as an exemplary model for this exploration as it unites the concepts of equality and oppression in order to yield a certain result, while simultaneously including a unique transformation over time that resulted in positive reform.

The basis for further inquiry will be drawn from Vladimir Kulic's "New Belgrade" and Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was consistently fraught with inter-ethnic tensions, attempting to forge a unitary nation while simultaneously favoring Serbs over other ethnicities. One of the pillars of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia's (CPY) political platform was "its promise to end ethnic inequalities" (Kulic). Tito's regime continued to enforce the need to achieve equality in their propaganda, and took measures to do so in the form of ethnic oppression. Ethnic and minority groups were unknowingly sent to schools for the mentally disabled, stunting these populations from mental growth, which in the mind of CPY stood as a national unifier. Gradually, the policies of CPY began to shift, and a resolution "set in motion a chain of events that transformed Yugoslavia profoundly, pushing it away from Stalinism towards internal reforms and an independent foreign policy" (Kulic). A system of workers' self-management was established with the goal of allowing individual enterprises more independent mobilization. Yugoslavia's paradigm shift towards greater independence granted more power to the individual, allowing Yugoslav society to develop in terms of mental exposure and growth (Kulic). Increased exposure to external culture promoted the mental growth that was once lacking as "the state greatly relaxed its control over cultural production, despite keeping hold of all economic levers of culture and a certain

level of censorship” (Kulic). The need to maintain a steadfast grip on the economic and financial aspects of Yugoslavia still enforced the regime’s dedication towards maintaining an equal nation, essentially incapable of uprising. The nation’s policy of oppression began to lessen, as “the pendulum of Yugoslavia’s foreign policy...oscillated wildly between the USSR and the [Western world]” (Kulic). Yugoslavia’s deviation from oppression yielded positive results as the nation’s production sector veered towards self-management and individualism. However, the yearning to maintain a nationally unified mindset still hindered Yugoslav society in terms of mental maximization. Martin Luther King’s advocacy for equality and criticism of segregation in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” provides a contrasting view on equality, oppression, and mental health. In his letter, King further enforces the need to implement equality in order to eliminate the inherent threat to justice faced by black people. “Though [he] was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist” King realized that one must take extreme measures in order to extend justice, promote peace, and find equality (King). The foundation with which he advocates for equality promotes human flourishing and perseverance. King does not use maltreatment to combat negligence, and recognizes that “oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever...the yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself” (King). With the presence of oppression came segregation—in both Yugoslavia and the United States—and according to King, “all segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality” (King). Conclusively, oppression has the potential to manifest damage to the personality, which is detrimental to the mind and its self-perception. Recognizing the damage oppression can have on a population facing this form of injustice, King uses positive and inspirational rhetoric to induce hope in the people he wishes to be deemed equal. King’s utilization of mechanisms to promote

equality, without psychological or physical oppression, were able to instil change without ingraining mental damage. Through the context of King's perspective, the absence of oppression does not diminish the positive motives for equality.

By using case studies and historical works to examine the dynamics of oppression and equality, it is possible to conclusively study mental health across cultures and time periods. The examination of the relationships between equality, oppression, and mental health have proven conclusive through the case studies that have been investigated in this paper. Ultimately, the presence of oppression can be successful in creating an equal society, but with that oppression comes mental instability. The absence of oppression can also be successful in helping to create an equal society, and with this absence comes the exclusion of mental instability. It is ultimately left up to the leaders of a given population to decide which relationship is optimal in creating their intended society. With this power comes an incredible amount of accountability and responsibility. In past and present day societies, the importance of mental health was and has been vastly undervalued. As nations, societies, and governments continue to develop it is important to take into account the relationships between equality, oppression, mental health, and their adverse effects.

Works Cited

- Antic, Ana. "The Pedagogy of Workers' Self Management." *Studies in Comparative Communism*, vol. 11, no. 5, 2001, pp. 440-461.,
doi:10.1017/6522-3212(81)90655-2.
- "Federalism in Yugoslavia." *Studies in Comparative Communism*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1981, pp. 361–362., doi:10.1016/0039-3592(81)90045-4.
- "Figure 2f from: Irimia R, Gottschling M (2016) Taxonomic Revision of *Rochefortia* Sw. (Ehretiaceae, Boraginales). *Data Journal* 4: e7720.
<https://doi.org/10.3897/BDJ.4.e7720>." doi:10.3897/bdj.4.e7720.figure2f.
- History Studies International Journal of History*, vol. 10, no. 7, 2018, pp. 241–264.,
doi:10.9737/hist.2018.658.
- Hrycak, Alexandra. "Coping with Chaos.", vol. 21, no. 6, 2003, pp. 1-60., *EBSCOhost*.
doi:10.1016/0042-3592(81)90045-4.
- "HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE CONCLUDES SEVENTY-SECOND SESSION | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." *United Nations*, United Nations,
www.un.org/press/en/2001/hrct610.doc.htm.
- Jenkins, Rachel, et al. "Mental Health in Post-Communist Countries." *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*, BMJ Publishing Group Ltd., 23 July 2005,
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1179748/.
- Kulic, Vladimir. "New Belgrade." *Architectural Analysis*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2014, pp. 240-263.,
doi:10.1016/6432-0900(81)90065-4.
- Mihailović, Dragoslav. *Goli Otok*. Službeni Glasnik, 2012.

“Tito Is Made President of Yugoslavia for Life.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 4 Mar.

2010, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/tito-is-made-president-for-life.

Ugc. “Goli Otok.” *Atlas Obscura*, Atlas Obscura, 26 Jan. 2010,

www.atlasobscura.com/places/goli-otok.

Yurtoğlu, Nadir, et al. “Yugoslavia’s Political Position.” EBSCOhost, 3 April 2011,

“[Http%3a%2f%2fwww.Historystudies.net%2fdergi%2f%2fbirinci-Dunya-Savasinda-Bir-Asayis-Sorunu-Sebinkarahisar-Ermeni-isyani20181092a4a8f.Pdf](http://www.Historystudies.net/dergi/birinci-Dunya-Savasinda-Bir-Asayis-Sorunu-Sebinkarahisar-Ermeni-isyani20181092a4a8f.Pdf).”