

Nielsen, Christian Axboe. 2021. *Yugoslavia and Political Assassinations: The History and Legacy of Tito's Campaigns Against the Émigrés*. IB Tauris, 253 pp. \$ 115 (Hardcover)

The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) imploded some thirty years ago. The amount of scholarly work about its creation, evolution, transformation, and dissolution left very few subjects relatively untouched. The role of the Yugoslav State Security Service (Služba državne bezbednosti – SDB), in political assassinations of members of the hostile anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist emigration is undoubtedly one of them. It is estimated that the service, which changed its name several times during its almost half a century-long existence (1945–1991), conducted at least a few dozen political assassinations abroad. The subject of SDB's political assassinations has often been discussed anecdotally with a great deal of mystification, ideologically driven distortion and supported with little verifiable evidence. However, it has rarely been systematically studied by historians and social scientists, and so far, there has been a serious dearth of publications in English devoted to this subject matter. This is understandable as studying intelligence agencies is always tricky due to the secretive nature of their work and the scarcity of credible sources. Studying these organisations is particularly daunting when it comes to the most sensitive and opaque operations, such as targeted assassinations, conducted by intelligence agencies of authoritarian states.

In his latest book, Christian Axboe Nielsen, Associate Professor of History and Human Security at Aarhus University, takes on this extraordinary challenge. The result is a groundbreaking study that fills this yawning gap. The author is a recognised scholar of police forces and policing in the former Yugoslavia. He started researching SDB assassinations upon the invitation of the Provincial High Court in Munich to serve as an expert witness in the case of the assassination of Stjepan Đureković in July 1983. To that end, in addition to the existing scholarly and grey literature and press reports, Nielsen mainly draws on the vast amount of Yugoslav archival documents which he either collected himself or which was provided to him by the German authorities who obtained it from the State archives of Croatia in the course of the investigation.

The book's key insight is that, without any reasonable doubt, SDB's struggle against hostile emigration included violent means such as kidnapping and assassination. Although this insight is not novel *per se*, what is novel is a systematic and thorough evidence-based description of how these operations were planned, discussed, organised, evolved and covered up. However, it should be noted that the book is neither a legal or ethical

evaluation of the political assassinations conducted by SDB, nor does it delve into the “whodunnit” type of investigation. While the book discusses many personalities, organisations, and events in detail, it is primarily a rich account of a state policy which led to the assassinations abroad. The analysis hence encompasses the political context, threat perception, normative and institutional framework, governance structures, standard operating procedures, and decision-making processes.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter presents the establishment and the structure of SDB. The second chapter discusses the struggle between socialist Yugoslavia’s secret service and hostile emigration. The third chapter investigates the methods of operations of SDB in its work abroad, including operational processing, surveillance, infiltrations, kidnappings and liquidations, often euphemistically called “paralysation” and “neutralisation”. While the goal was ultimately always to “pacify” the targets, i.e. to prevent émigrés from continuing their anti-Yugoslav activities, Nielsen shows that assassinations were only used as the last resort. Following the liquidations, SDB usually pushed the narrative that they resulted from “internal settling of accounts”. The fourth chapter zeroes in on the Bugojno uprising in 1972 when an armed group of 19 members of the Croatian Revolutionary Brotherhood, formed in Australia and trained in Western Europe, entered SFRY from Austria and drove to Bosnia in the area of Bugojno where they planned to stage an armed rebellion. Soon after that, police, the army and the territorial defence were mobilised to neutralise the group, which was eventually completed one month later. This was a painful humiliation for SDB, which failed to obtain information and prevent such large incursion. This was also a watershed moment that catalysed a much more offensive approach of SDB in its struggle against hostile emigration abroad. The fifth chapter analyses the case of Stjepan Đureković, manager in the Croatian oil company (INA) who defected to Germany in April 1982, applied for asylum in West Germany, quickly rose in the hierarchy of the Croatian émigrés circles and was eventually assassinated by SDB agents on 28 July 1983 in a small Bavarian town of Wolfratshausen. The conclusion summarises the book’s key points and analyses the co-optation of republican branches of the SDB by newly created states following the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The book is a valuable contribution to scarce literature in English on SFRY intelligence agencies and especially about their operations abroad, including the most sensitive among them, such as assassinations. To that end, particularly useful is the first chapter which offers an excellent insight into the organisation of SDB at different levels of the federal, republican and local level of governance but also its leadership, chain of command, standard operating procedures, its embeddedness in the wider intelligence community and broader structures of political oversight. Most importantly, the chapter zooms onto the second administration of the federal SDB, responsible for enemy *émigrés*. While SDB also went after the Albanian and Serbian hostile emigration, the book primarily focuses on assassinations of the Croatian *émigrés*. The reason for such a focus is not only the fact that it consumed most of the attention of the SDB’s second administration but also because it was covered by the documentation which was at the author’s disposal. The author draws on official documents and rulebooks of SDB to depict work methods, including

operational processing, engagement of agents and informants, counterintelligence work abroad, surveillance and other special investigative techniques.

One of the book's biggest strengths is its reliability. The author made a conscious decision only to rely on archival material and written documentation while mostly leaving out dubious testimonials provided to the court or other sources which are either ideologically distorted or lack credibility. This makes Nielsen's book sticking out from a sea of unverifiable claims, rumours and oral histories which are abundant across the post-Yugoslav public sphere. Against the backdrop of richly described contextual and institutional context, he uses firm evidence to connect the dots. This allows him to make plausible inferences that leave little doubt that SDB conducted political assassinations, but also why it did them, how this policy discourse and practice evolved, how decisions were made, what structures and resources were used, against whom and to what practical effect. Finally, Nielsen avoids the twin pitfalls of demonising the Yugoslav secret service or its whitewashing. Instead, he provides a balanced, realistic, and evidence-based account of how the Yugoslav secret service used political assassinations abroad, a controversial but routinely used method unfortunately still operated by many intelligence agencies of democratic and authoritarian states alike, to fight an objective national objective security threat posed by the hostile emigration.

Lastly, a few minor limitations of the book should be mentioned. To begin with, the subtitle of the book is somewhat misleading. It is clear that none of the sensitive operations which took place in the period from 1945 until Tito's death in 1980, and which are analysed in the book, could have been conducted without Tito's direct or indirect approval. However, most of the analysis presented in the book takes place at the level of SDB. When it comes to the broader governance structures, the Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order is covered well but the role of Tito is discussed only in passing and occasionally. Moreover, the key case studied in the book, the murder of Stjepan Đureković, was conducted after Tito's death. Another limitation is that the book does not draw on the broader literature in intelligence studies, foreign policy analysis, and security studies. This would make the book more relevant not only to historians and area studies scholars but also to the wider academic community. Also, the book's structure tilts between the chronological and analytical logic, which results in occasional overlapping and repetition. Furthermore, although the book refrains from making unsubstantiated claims, it makes one at the very outset. On page two, the author claims that SFRY leadership "oversaw a campaign of targeted assassinations that dwarfed that of any other communist state," which he estimates to be at least in dozens, possibly in triple digits. These estimates might be realistic provided that the author only had in mind assassinations abroad. However, he neither backs these estimates up with evidence or references nor does he compare them to the numbers of political assassinations of the intelligence agencies of other European communist states such as KGB, Stasi or Securitate, let alone those of non-European communist states. Finally, the book abounds in names, organisations, and events that might confuse the uninitiated reader. An annexe with short background information about the chronology and key actors would be a helpful resource.

Despite these minor limitations, the book is a masterful depiction of arguably some of the darkest episodes in SFRY history. The book skilfully combines the objectivity of an evidence-based academic analysis with a thrill of spy novels. It will be a genuine treat for anyone interested in Yugoslav history, espionage and national security affairs.

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