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FRAMING 13 JULY UPRISING: THE CHANGING PERCEPTIONS IN THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

ABSTRACT: *The paper explores the narratives of the 13th of July Uprising in Montenegro in several historical phases and instances in the last 80 years. Research broadly identifies three distinct and fundamentally competing narratives which dominated the public sphere and (re)shaped popular attitudes towards this cornerstone event in the Montenegrin History. Distinct narratives are intrinsically linked to the following historical periods (1) 1945 – 1991, Yugoslav era and state-sponsored Marxist historiography; (2) 1991-2006, dissolution of Yugoslavia and democratic transition; (3) 2006-current, independent Montenegro. The paper postulates that the changing political context and ‘top-down’ value approach determined the radically different interpretations and contextualization of the Uprising in 1941, framing the event(s) accordingly. Differently than in other similar historiographical disputes evolving (changing) narratives brought significant differences in material interpretations of the causes, political agenda, and mainstream flow of events. Together with the nation-building effort in the last decades the Uprising received a gradually different shading which stands in the heart of the paper’s research.*

Keywords: Montenegro, Uprising, narratives, historiography, framing

The uprising in Montenegro, fondly referred to as the 13 July Uprising, was an insurgency against Italian occupation in Montenegro. Launched by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1941, Italian authorities suppressed the uprising within six weeks owing to their military might and resource capabilities. However, the confrontations continued, albeit with comparatively lower momentum, until December 1941, during the Battle of Pljevlja.¹ The

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¹ Leopoldo, Bonafulla, *The July Revolution: Barcelona 1909* (AK Press, 2021), p. 23.

leaders of the revolutionaries were mainly communist dissidents and former Royal Yugoslav Army generals from Montenegro who showed significant dissatisfaction with Italian inversion. Most of the generals who partook in the insurgency were formerly prisoners of war captured during Yugoslav inversion. The communist dissidents managed the rebellion and offered political advisory while offering military support. Historians opine that the entire nation was appalled, and the people boldly disregarded the privileged position extended to them by the occupying force.² The civilian majority refused to submit to the occupying power and resorted to fighting for Yugoslavia. Within weeks of an onslaught, the insurgents captured nearly all the territorial boundaries of Montenegro. Fierce fighting recorded in most parts of the country forced Italian troops to retreat from the battlefield and resort to their Pljevlja strongholds. The counter-offensive launched by the Italian forces suppressed the uprising in three weeks. Historians reckon the events of the 13 July Uprising in various perspectives, including worker's revolution, rejection of Italian aggression in the post-WWII era, the onslaught against fascism, and the pursuit of nationalism.³

At the beginning of spring 1941, Montenegro suffered the Italian invasion as part of Axis conquer of the Yugoslav Kingdom. Differently than the rest of the country, Montenegro was occupied by the Italians who sustain strong grip of power throughout their military presence.⁴ Historians reckon that the collapse of the Yugoslav military weakened the state. Consequently, the civilian majority had easy access to firearms and military equipment. By mid-1941, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had recruited and acquired nearly 2,000 members with approximately 3,000 youth followers.⁵ The party had a widespread presence in the region featuring significant strongholds such as Kotor, Montenegro, and the Sandzak. By late 1941, the party had recruited enough firemen to launch an onslaught against the axis powers, particularly the Italians' occupying force.⁶ Grievances leading up to the war mainly revolved around the expulsion of Montenegrins and translated into other areas that served as a pivotal even in the fight of South Slaves against the Axis power, paving way to the formation of Yugoslav Partisan Resistance.

² James Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia 1941-1943* (Enigma, 2005), p. 37.

³ *Ibid*, p. 38.

⁴ Stevan Pavlowitch and Dejan Djokic, *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 123.

⁵ Glenda Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth Century Europe* (SUNY Press, 2001), p. 52.

⁶ Emanuele Sica and Richard Carrier, *Italy and the Second World War: Alternative Perspectives* (BRILL, 2018), p. 136.

Furthermore, the influx of refugees and prisoners of war from other parts of the region fleeing from terror and maladministration complicated the matter. Historians reckon that Montenegrins also utterly detested the Italians for annexing the crop growing and food-rich areas around Kosovo.⁷ Italians also occupied salt-manufacturing industries at Ulcinj, further worsening the situation. Arguably, these anxieties ran alongside the growing economic meltdown created by the temporary removal of Yugoslav banknotes from circulation in the market. However, one of the standard narratives around the event postulated that ultimate incident triggering the revolution was the proclamation and restoration of the Kingdom of Montenegro, governed by an Italian monarch and ruled by Montenegrin nationalist adherents.⁸ The directive reinstating the Kingdom came as an official announcement by the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry. The ministry proclaimed the Italian convention comprising Montenegrin separatists on 12 July 1941, followed by the beginning of the uprising on 13 July 1941. That become part of the much disputed and controversial assessment of the even, essentially situating the Uprising as a reactive armed rebellion instead of a well-organized and planned maneuver to limit the military presence of the Italian forces. The motives for such reading of the event are best to be found in the later political developments which were burdened by the attempts to downplay the role of the Communist Party, as well as other members of the worker movement cells inside and outside Montenegro. However, that is only the start of the complex and intriguing story of the changing narratives around the 13 July Uprising in the Montenegrin historiography. This overview is just a modest step in an attempt to conceptualize understanding of the most remarkable event in the 20th century Montenegrin history.

A large body of literature from various scholars and authorships has explored the narratives of the 13 July Uprising in Montenegro from different perspectives. These narratives exist in different historical contexts and experiences recorded over the years since the debut of the uprising. This paper identifies various narratives which have dominated public discourse and eventually shaped and reshaped popular opinion across different contexts. Fundamentally, these perspectives revolve around narratives such as the workers' revolution, rejection of Italian aggression in the post-WWII era, the onslaught against fascism, and the pursuit of nationalism.⁹ Research ex-

⁷ Nigel Thomas, Dusan Babac, and Shumate Johnny, *Yugoslav Armies 1941–45* (Bloomsbury USA, 2021), p. 172.

⁸ Robert Kennedy, *German Antiguerrilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1944)* (Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1989), p. 72.

⁹ Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, the Italians, and the Second World War* (OUP Oxford, 2008), p. 127.

plores these distinct perspectives considering historical, recent, and current experiences.

Different historical contexts have had their fair share of these experiences, thus shaping their specific viewpoints. For instance, in the communist epoch, the uprising was viewed as a workers' revolution and an attempt toward self-determination.¹⁰ Arguably, this period also regarded the uprising as a bold rejection of Italian occupation and annexation of Montenegro.¹¹ Nonetheless, before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the revolution was viewed as a rejection toward the continued Italian aggression during the World War II era.¹² However, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, society partook a somewhat contradictory narrative, especially seeing the uprising under the lenses of nationalistic pursuits. Finally, in the post-independence Montenegro, beginning 2006 upwards, the viewpoint shifted toward antifascism and nation-building.

During the uprising, the revolution's focus was relatively clear, with society viewing it as a workers' revolution and an attempt to achieve self-determination. The occupying Italian force had interfered with virtually every aspect of life, encouraging forces with similar ambitions to regroup to launch an onslaught against the Italians.

Self-determination

The immediate reason that triggered the uprising was the quest for self-determination. Happening barely after the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' proclamation to restore and reclaim the Kingdom of Montenegro, all evidence showed that the uprising was triggered by the popular will of the majority to recapture their independence.¹³ The proclamation by the Italians to render Montenegro as their colony created a growing fear that the occupying force was embarking on an expansionist mission. Triggered by the anxiety to lose their independence, the Communist Party rallied its forces and launched a violent onslaught on 13 July 1941.¹⁴ Even though the Communist party fronted a major offensive, the Italian military outnumbered their military equipment and armies. Arguably, this made it practically challenging for the Com-

¹⁰ Jeremy Black, *War in European History, 1494-1660: Essential Bibliography Series* (Potomac Books, Inc., 2011), p. 34.

¹¹ United States Department of the Army, *The German Campaigns in the Balkans (Spring, 1941)* (Department of the Army, 1953), p. 143.

¹² Mirna Zakić, *Ethnic Germans and National Socialism in Yugoslavia in World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 52.

¹³ Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 78.

¹⁴ Taylor and Francis, *The Italian Wars 1494-1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe: Modern Wars in Perspective* (Routledge, 2014), p. 136.

munist Party adherents to maintain their foothold in the war.¹⁵ Consequently, the Italian forces subdued them and rendered their onslaught baseless within six weeks. The self-determination perspective holds because the Italian proclamation triggered the uprising to take away the people's independence.

The workers' revolution

The second perspective adopted by scholars and historians regarding the 13 July Uprising was the workers' revolution narrative. Historically, workers' rights have led to significant battles that have shaped world history. Especially where the occupying force is insensitive to workers' rights, the chances of revolutions become evident. In Montenegro's case, workers were appalled, especially after the Italians occupied the salt-manufacturing industries at Ulcinj.¹⁶ Arguably, this experience resulted in widespread anxiety as it rendered many people jobless and helpless. After conquering the salt mines and industries, the occupying force introduced new laws and unpopular working conditions. Besides, the subjugation of the economy resulted in widespread hunger as the occupying force assumed full control of the food-rich zones.¹⁷ Faced with hunger and impending poverty, the Communist Party rallied its forces and the civilian populations to take arms against the occupying Italian military.¹⁸ Hence, during much of the uprising and the Communist Part epoch, historians reckon that the uprising was triggered by the workers' quest to regain their jobs and attain economic independence.

Before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the narrative about the uprising revolves around key concerns such as Italian aggression, foreign military occupation, and the pursuits of independence. During this epoch, there was growing anxiety in the region regarding the future of Montenegro. The overpowering appetite of the Italians to expand their hegemony was singular anxiety in Montenegro.

Rejection of Italian aggression

The narrative that once dominated the public sphere predominantly postulated that the 13 July Uprising was a bold and open rejection of Ital-

¹⁵ Pavlović V, *The Treaty of London and the creation of Yugoslavia*, *Acta Histriae*, 4, 2017, pp. 1030.

¹⁶ Charles O'Reilly, *Forgotten Battles: Italy's War of Liberation, 1943-1945* (Lexington Books, 2001), p. 128.

¹⁷ Taylor, F. L., *The Art of War in Italy 1494-1529* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), p. 141.

¹⁸ Pavlović V, *Serbia and Italy in the Great War*, *Institute for Balkan Studies*. (Belgrade, 2019), p. 23.

ian occupation without contextualizing other important political and social issues. The fascist Italian administration saw Montenegro as a good part of Imperial Italy, which would extend over to the Adriatic coastline to northern Greece.¹⁹ Historians reckon that the Italian authority intended to recolonize the local populations and further forced them to relinquish their cultural identities and adopt Italian national identity.²⁰ The plans by the Italian authority infuriated the local population prompting the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to intervene. The growing resentment for the Italians made it possible for the Communist Party to grow in large numbers, recruit armies, and prepare for war. Arguably, this perspective holds in the sense that Italian aggression featured as an establishment that had to be confronted. A greater majority viewed Italians as aggressors committed to expansionist efforts post-WWII era.²¹ The post-war era witnessed growing anxiety against totalitarian regimes, which was the primary pivot of Italian-type administration. The urge to confront the Italians stemmed from a popular belief to rid the nation of tyranny and war.

Under these lenses, the proponents of the 13 July uprising reckon that the revolution was triggered by a growing desire to reject Italian occupation to safeguard the nation's independence, but the same time remaining loyal to the broader Yugoslav state. Thus, the differentiation between nation and statehood become apparent and pronounce, aiming to emphasize comfort the Montenegrin nation did enjoy within the borders of a state shared among all South Slavic nations. The occupying force had threatened to continue their expansionist efforts as viewed in the proclamation of the restoration of the Kingdom of Montenegro, governed by an Italian monarch and ruled by Montenegrin separatist adherents.²² The directive reinstating the Kingdom was a direct attack on the sovereignty of the people and the nation.

The pursuits of identity

Italian occupation in Montenegro directly confronted the population with the potential identity loss. National identity is a sense of belongingness bestowed to citizens through distinctive features and shared orientations such as culture, language, customs, and traditions.²³ The pursuits of identity mandated the local population and their armies to take to the battlefields

¹⁹ Mitja Velkonija, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (A&M University Press, 2003), 52.

²⁰ Taylor, F. L, *The Art of War in Italy: Didactic Press Paperbacks* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), p. 231.

²¹ Philip Michael Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe: Origins of Modern Wars* (Routledge, 2014), p. 29.

²² Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (The Lawbook Exchange, 2008), p. 23.

²³ Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia 1941-1943*, p. 37.

to defend their cultural identities.²⁴ The battle of Pljevlja is particularly notable owing to its bloody nature and local resource mobilization.²⁵ After gaining initial success in the uprising, communist dissidents took charge of the war frontiers. Their administration antagonized a part of population in Montenegro, but at the same time allowed for political consolidation and formation of institutional framework that would remain in place even after the war. Partisans for that regard established a brief reign of terror but soon realized that such an approach to governance was unpopular and expensive.²⁶ Essentially, in the pursuit of national identity, the partisans laid various ambushes against the Italian administration to establish their authority.²⁷ Observers of the 13 July revolution reckon that the pursuit of identity motivated them to take arms against the Italian occupation. Depending on the narrative's personal experiences and perspective, the pursuit of identity suffices as a formidable viewpoint to analyze the uprising.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia stemmed from a series of economic and political upheavals. Conflicts and wars beset the region during much of the early and mid-1990s. The various states that made up the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, including Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia Republic, and Herzegovina, disintegrated between early 1991 and mid-1992.²⁸ The varied, complex reasons that triggered the disintegration of Yugoslavia ranged from differing cultural, religious, and political divisions and antagonism between different ethnic groupings in the countries.²⁹ More importantly, the memories of the atrocities witnessed during the Second World War committed by different sides, and the radical nationalistic forces made it hard for the nation to hold.³⁰ Furthermore, dissolution of the country meant a new understanding and framing of complex shared history including the said event.

The onslaught against fascism

Fascism espouses rulership by an oppressive dictator who typically governs by violently suppressing dissenting voices while also controlling

²⁴ David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer, *Markers and rules. Understanding National Identity*, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 14.

²⁵ Giordano Merlicco, Between Old Austria and New Foes: Italy and the Yugoslav Project (1917-18). *Historical Records*, 94(1-2), 2021, p. 116.

²⁶ Matteo Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement & the Yugoslav Resistance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 71.

²⁷ Guibernau, Montserrat. Anothony D. Smith on Nations and National Identity: A critical assessment (*Nations and Nationalism*, 10(1-2), 2014), p127.

²⁸ Kenneth Morrison, *Montenegro: A Modern History* (I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 24.

²⁹ Velkonija, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, p. 56.

³⁰ Arts, Wil and Halman Loek, *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe: Painting Europe's Moral Landscapes* (Brill, 2013), p. 37.

all commercial activities and promoting racism. The war era exposed the dangers of fascism, which was the sole governing model wielded by Italians.³¹ Revolutionary dictators favored this governance model since it offered a shortcut to authoritarian rule. The oppressive fascist regime led to significant economic hardships. One of the framings included the synthesis of the fight between two ideological camps, moving the event into the arena of political theory but also aiming to portray the event in the similar manner as the Spanish Civil War.

Fascism negatively transformed the overall outlook of Italy in the estimation of the world. It characterized itself by an authoritarian police state with limited regard for the people's welfare and freedoms.³² Fascism created a humanitarian crisis in regions where it was practiced, including Italy, where it emerged. Fascism led to growing dissent in Montenegro as the locals increasingly grew anxious owing to Italian occupation.³³ Populations viewed the Italian administration as fascist, leading to a bold move to reject it altogether. Depending on the narrative's personal experiences and perspective, the onslaught against fascism suffices as a formidable viewpoint to analyze the revolution.

Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Montenegro experienced a series of political instability before it declared its independence from the federation following the 2006 Referendum. The post-independence era provided a new angle to view the 13 July uprising.³⁴ Observers of this history reckon that the pursuits of nation-building and nationalism influenced the revolution. This perspective mainly stems from the submission that the country emerged from the experiences borrowed from the Italian confrontation some eight decades ago.³⁵ Similar experiences were witnessed in Montenegro where the urge to establish and maintain internal sovereignty was imminent. The existence of a foreign power headed by Italians posed a major threat of annulling the independence of Montenegro that had been in existence centuries before.³⁶ The popular uprising witnessed immedi-

³¹ Swansea University, *What Was the Impact of Fascist Rule Upon Italy from 1922 to 1945?* (<https://www.swansea.ac.uk/history/history-study-guides/what-was-the-impact-of-fascist-rule-upon-italy-from-1922-to-1945/#:~:text=>), par. 3.

³² Christine Shaw, *Italy and the European Powers: The Impact of War, 1500-1530* (Original from the University of Michigan, 2019), p. 25.

³³ Daniel Bar-Tal, Staub, Ervin. *Patriotism in the Lives of Individuals and Nations* (Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1997), p. 172.

³⁴ European Stability Initiative, *Picture Story: Realm of the Black Mountain July 2007*. (https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_picture_story_-_realm_of_the_black_mountain_-_july_2007.pdf), p. 16.

³⁵ Paul Gilbert, *The Nationalism Project* (The Westview Press, 2006), p. 123.

³⁶ Banac, Ivo. *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1988). p. 27.

ately after the proclamation and restoration of the Kingdom of Montenegro, governed by an Italian monarch was a demonstration to safeguard nationalistic interests. Depending on the underlying experiences and viewpoints, the nationalistic narrative offers relevant viewpoints to analyze the uprising.

Nation-building

National building is an ongoing and increasing pursuit by a country's population to converge regardless of their orientational differences to assume the roles and responsibilities of enhancing the quality and overall outlook of their country. Italian occupation in Montenegro provided a litmus test for the country's citizens to chart out their course and destiny as one indivisible people.³⁷ The Italian establishment confronted Montenegrins with the challenge to attest their spirit and quest for nationhood. The spirit to build and sustain their internal self-governance culminated in a series of protests that yielded into the uprising. The popular uprising was a demonstration of the people's will to safeguard their country from annexation and champion a path towards economic and political freedom.³⁸ The Italian occupying force demonstrated particular interest in recapturing Montenegro and thwart their independence.³⁹ However, Montenegrins raised a strong objection to the advances of the foreign power that might render their independence obsolete.⁴⁰ The 13 July uprising mirrored the events happening in modern times as foreign powers take strategic positions in regional and global affairs directly threatening smaller nation, but also building the unique and specific identity as a reflection of the centuries long struggle for freedom. Current reading of the Uprising in the majority of the population of Montenegro, predominantly focuses on the morals and virtues of the event, elevating it to the level of philosophical substance of the existence of Montenegrin nation. Depending on the position within the current political landscape, the nation building narrative offers pertinent viewpoint to analyze and critique the revolution. There are numerous perspectives to analyze and critique the 13 July Uprising that occurred in Montenegro. These perspectives inform the narratives that exist both in public discourse and existing printed literature. Various experiences and historical contexts inform these viewpoints owing to the di-

³⁷ Pavlowitch and Djokic, *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia*, p. 124.

³⁸ Djokić D. (ed.), *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918-1992* (Hurst & Co., 2003), p. 12.

³⁹ Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War*, p. 36.

⁴⁰ Lauren, P.G, *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination* (Routledge, 2018), p. 12.

verse nature of the experiences across those contexts. Popular narratives revolve around workers' revolution, self-determination, rejection of Italian aggression, the onslaught against fascism, and the pursuit of nationalism and nation-building.

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Summary

The paper discusses the narratives of the 13th of July Uprising in Montenegro in several historical phases and events in the last 80 years. It argues that narrative change matches the social and political developments in Montenegro. Moreover, that is to say, the Uprising as a historical symbol became an integral part of the state-building narrative. Finally, the paper traces the changes in the perspective and provides a contextual understanding of all its aspects.

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