

Tito's 'return' stirs Yugoslav emotions

■ An actor playing the leader in a film appears on the street, making some long for the days of a united Yugoslavia.

Associated Press

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia — "Tito is alive!" screamed a woman, pointing to a figure in a heavily decorated marshal's uniform like that of the late Yugoslav president.

A large crowd in downtown Belgrade virtually mobbed the man dressed like Josip Broz Tito, the president who kept Yugoslavs united until he died May 4, 1980.

The man was an actor, sent into the street to test public reaction for a film documentary titled *Tito, the Second Time Among the Serbs*. Passers-by knew the actor couldn't be the real thing, but emotions poured out anyway.

None of Tito's successors, after all, had been able to maintain his accomplishment: holding Yugoslavia together. The country spiraled downward after his death, then in 1991 was sucked into warfare that has left perhaps 200,000 people dead and millions homeless.

Even though Serbs now play a leading role in the current ethnic war, many Serbians still revere the leader who advocated a united, multinational country.

"You are a Croat and I'm a Serb, but I respected you the most!" a man told the actor. Another told him that when he "returns up there" he should take current Yugoslav leaders along — "and make sure that they never come back."

Some in the street cursed the Tito stand-in as a Croat and a Communist. But others, disillusioned with today's violence, were overwhelmed to see an image of the leader of what once was a peaceful and relatively prosperous country.

Yugoslavia, under Tito's brand of communism, was respected in the West above all because of its resistance to the Soviets. In 1948, Tito imprisoned thousands of pro-Russian Yugoslavs on an isolated Adriatic island.

At home, Tito kept intolerance among Yugoslavia's nationalities under tight control, distributing power to balance different ethnic groups' strength.

He clamped down on both Croat and Serb nationalists in the



1973 file photo

Tito, who died in 1980, suppressed nationalism.

1970s, purging them from power in the two main rival republics. Nationalist publications were banned, and writers were jailed.

But national sentiments never died out. The system depended too much on Tito's personal authority, and could not cope without him.

Central authority gradually disintegrated as former Yugoslavia's six republics vied for greater shares of power.

When nationalist leader Slobodan Milosevic came to power in Serbia in 1987, rival republics — fearing he would expand his hard-line rule throughout Yugoslavia — began seeking independence.

Slovenia was the first to break with Yugoslavia, severing ties after a brief war in June 1991.

Croatia followed, but its 600,000 Serbs, backed by the federal army, rebelled, refusing to live under Croatian nationalist leadership. About 10,000 people died before a shaky cease-fire in January 1992.

War spread next to multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina — a virtual microcosm of the old Yugoslavia where Tito was especially revered — after its majority Muslims and Croats voted for independence on Feb. 29, 1992. Bosnian Serbs rejected the breakaway, sparking the most savage fighting in Europe since World War II.

When the actor playing Tito caused a commotion, police arrived and arrested the camera crew. They didn't dare touch Tito, alive or not.

The film, said director Zelimir Zilnik, shows "a nation that will survive only if it stops pounding its own head against a wall."