

## Reflections on Yugoslavia: 1918 - 1994

The bloody civil war in the former Yugoslavia continues. The federal state has been fractured, and few who once resided within its borders have been spared the effects of the widespread death and destruction. For the rest of the world, while still struggling with the conflict's moral and humanitarian questions, the primary concern remains the threat that its violence will spill across old borders into already tense ethnic situations in neighboring states and throughout Europe. While the names of the players in this deadly little war, as well as Balkan geography, have become all too familiar to us, to understand the full nature of this conflict, it is vital that its history be examined. By gaining an understanding of Yugoslavian history and the history of its peoples, one then realizes that Yugoslavia may merely be a 70-year-old mistake that is trying to rectify itself (Rusinow 143).

Created at Versailles by the victors at the end of the Great War, Yugoslavia was from its inception a country without Yugoslavs. Largely made-up of people who did not view themselves as Yugoslavs, the vast majority were associated with a specific nationality connected with one of Yugoslavia's former six republics or other ethnic groups (Lendvai 253). Within the borders of what was Yugoslavia before the present civil war, there were four official languages and at least twenty-four different ethnic groups creating a volatile situation which has characterized the region for centuries (Reaves F5).

The three major ethnic groups, the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, each established themselves in their respective areas between the 6th and 10th centuries. The Slovenes settled the furthest west and north and developed close ties with their Germanic neighbors. They eventually succumbed to Frankish rule and converted to Christianity under Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire (Singleton 30-1).

The Croats settled primarily along the Adriatic coast. With the declaration of their first kingdom in 924, the Croats rejected Byzantine suzerainty and pledged their allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. In 1102, the king of landlocked Hungary crowned himself King of Croatia, thus linking Croatia with Hungary (Singleton 31).

Serbian tribes were united in the central mountains of the Balkans by the common threat posed by the Bulgars to the east. To combat this threat, the Serbian leaders recruited the support of the Byzantine emperor and thus adopted the Eastern Orthodox religion. The Serbian empire was broken with the arrival of the Ottoman Turks between the 14th and 16th centuries creating two additional groups: the Bosnians and the Montenegrins (Singleton 34-5).

Thus, the basic make-up of the Balkan region between the 16th and 19th centuries was one characterized by two distinct and very different developing cultures. In the north,

Slovenia and Croatia were dominated by the Habsburg Dynasty (later the Austro-Hungarian Empire), where they developed along Western lines tied to the Roman Catholic Church. Serbia and its partners in the south remained under the control of the Ottoman Empire and were influenced by the Orthodox Church. Despite these differences, the 19th century gave rise to a new force that knew no boundaries—nationalism (Singleton 44-7).

Amongst the Slovenes and the Croats, nationalism grew peacefully, creating a common feeling in opposing Austro-Hungarian rule. The desire for change was centered along creating autonomous areas within the existing empire through constitutional means. The Serbs, on the other hand, sought a complete break with the Ottoman Empire and the creation of an independent Serbia through armed revolt. Serbia's success, towards the end of the century, inspired and stimulated the independence drives of the other groups. However, at the hands of the Great Powers; *i.e.*, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russia, and Turkey, who wanted to thwart the growth of Pan-Slavism and prevent the increase of influence of any one of the Great Powers; Serbian independence was taken away in favor of *de facto* Austrian control (Singleton 44-60). A series of events after the turn of the century brought to fruition Otto von Bismarck's 19th-century prediction that the next European war would begin in the Balkans. A 1908 revolt in Turkey weakened Turkey's position in the region, making Balkan expansion more attractive for both Austria-Hungary and Russia. Austria-Hungary then formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, backed in their actions by an alliance with Germany. As a result of this hostile act, Serbia intensified its covert support of Slav dissidents throughout the region. Between 1912 and 1913, Serbian victories in the Balkan Wars threatened Austria-Hungary to the point where Austria-Hungary decided to make a provocative military exhibition that culminated with a visit to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, by the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. This proved to be the spark that ignited Europe, as a Serbian-supported "Black-hand" terrorist assassinated both Franz Ferdinand and his wife on 28 June 1914, setting into motion an unstoppable escalation of events that started the First World War (Singleton 58).

When the war finally ended in 1918, the peacemakers of Versailles created a new South Slav state—the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes—uniting the three vastly different ethnic groups in a "shotgun marriage." The new state was to be a "constitutional, democratic, and parliamentary monarchy" that accorded equality to the different ethnic and religious groups. Unfortunately, what emerged was a highly centralized constitution and government under Serbian domination (Singleton 66-75).

Despite the desires of some to make the South Slav state work, their efforts were counterbalanced by the forces of ethnic extremism that were fueled by growing religious and ethnic inequalities. By 1928, this conflict paralyzed the parliamentary system, bringing in 1929 a royal dictatorship under Serbian leadership. The kingdom was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and was characterized by government control of the press, increased action against dissidents, allegations of torture and police brutality, and the general repression of extreme nationalist views—all of which only served to increase nationalist extremism. It was in this general state of disunity and instability that Yugoslavia found itself faced with Hitler's Nazi threat (Singleton 76-83).

Isolated and physically unable to resist a Nazi attack, Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941, formally joining the Nazi camp. However, the government had done so without the consent and approval of the Yugoslav people and army. The army subsequently staged a *coup d'état* on 26 and 27 March, overthrowing the government and reestablishing the original 1918 monarchy. This new government quickly declared that it would abide by the protocol that had been signed with Germany on the 25th, but asserted a demand of not wanting to be drawn into the war. On 6 April 1941, Hitler, furious at Yugoslavia's impertinence, unleashed his Blitzkrieg without warning. The unprepared, poorly equipped Yugoslav Royal Army crumbled, and Yugoslavia was forced to surrender unconditionally on 17 April 1941 (Nyrop 28-9).

After Hitler's forces crushed Yugoslavia, most of the country was partitioned amongst the Axis powers. The one exception was Croatia, which was set up as an "independent" state with Nazi-installed right-wing terrorists, the Ustashi, at its helm. It is here that the fierce hatred between Serbs and Croats has its origins. The Ustashi dedicated themselves to eliminating the Serbian minority from Croatia. The Ustashi "solution" was to exile a third of the Serbs, convert another third to Catholicism, and physically exterminate the rest. While the actual number killed is still hotly debated between Serbs and Croats, evidence indicates that the total number was in the six-figure range (Beloff 58).

After 1941, two resistance groups emerged in Yugoslavia to combat the Nazis and the Ustashi—the Cetniks and the communist Partisans. The Cetniks were primarily leftovers from the Yugoslav Royal Army who were loyal to the king and strongly anti-communist. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), or Partisan forces, were under the leadership of Joseph Broz Tito. While the Partisans advocated total war against the invaders, the Cetniks favored inaction for fear of Nazi reprisals. Thus, the two groups were ideologically opposed and adopted totally different tactics. Hatred between the two groups grew to the point where they turned on each other in a bloody civil war (Nyrop 30-1). Of the 1.75 million Yugoslavs killed during the war (11 percent of the total population) it is estimated that half were killed by other Yugoslavs (Singleton 87). As the German forces retreated and the war came to an end, Tito tightened his control by eliminating both the Ustashi and Cetniks. During

the "free" elections of November 1945, Tito's communist People's Front Party won an overwhelming victory by using propaganda, coercion, and terror to eliminate the opposition parties. The subsequent constitution established a Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisting of six constituent republics: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia. In addition, the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina were included in Serbia. Tito's federalism was mostly theoretical as all real power rested with Tito himself in the central government (Nyrop 34-5). By 1950, economic stagnation and growing nationalism led Tito to the conclusion that economic and political reforms were necessary for the preservation of his socialist state. His solution consisted "of a state for each South Slav nation in an increasingly genuine federation, economic decentralization, and cultural autonomy under a centralized but multinational and supposedly internationalist communist dictatorship" (Rusinow 146). As a result of his reforms, the Yugoslavian economy escaped stagnation and experienced rapid growth from 1953 through the mid-1960s (Nyrop 45).

For three and-a-half decades, the charismatic Tito, with the help of his Federal Army and secret police, was able to maintain control and unity. Tito died in May 1980. Without Tito to "knock heads," the economy immediately crumbled, resulting in declining production, high unemployment and inflation, and a drop in the standard of living. The republics and nationalities, each pulling in different directions, managed to render the federal political system of multinational collective presidencies, created by Tito in the early 1970s, ineffective in reaching any agreements on a solution or reforms to ease their economic woes (Rusinow 147).

By 1989 a total economic collapse seemed probable without reforms. Labor unrest throughout the Federal Republic became a feature of daily life. The years 1989 and 1990 each saw nearly 1,900 strikes involving nearly a half-million workers. In both 1989 and 1990 more than one-third of Yugoslavia's 27,600 state-run enterprises operated in the red. Inflation reached an unbelievable 2,600 percent in 1989. By January 1991, the standard of living had dropped by 50 percent from the 1982 standard to that of the mid-1960s (Andrejevich 44). While the government tried to implement economic reforms, they were too late. Economic despair has seized all the peoples of Yugoslavia; and with nothing else to turn to they have placed their faith in nationalism.

Ethnic differences and conflict, brought on by economic despair and driven by nationalism, lie at the heart of the present civil war. Within all of the republics, territorial boundaries cut across ethnic boundaries; thus there is conflict between the republics over their ethnic minorities. Each ethnic group, nationalistic in its own right, naturally, wants the unification of their ethnic peoples. Their greatest fear in the break-up is that they will be isolated from the rest of their nationality (Rusinow 145).

The greatest source of conflict is the renewal of the fierce hatred between the Serbs and the Croats. Today, almost 24

percent of all Serbs live outside Serbia, mostly in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, while 22 percent of all Croats reside outside Croatia, mostly in Vojvodina and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Rusinow 145).

Civil war ignited over a question of organization following the collapse of communism that swept Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia. New, freely elected governments in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia sought a loose confederation of sovereign republics similar to that of the European Community's internal market. Primary opposition came from Serbia, with its two provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, and Montenegro. This "centralized bloc" remains dominated by the old communist leadership and the army, who want a strong federal government and a strong federal presidency. Serbian designs are feared by the other republics as a move to establish Serbian hegemony, while the independence moves by Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina are seen by Serbia as an attempt to divide and destroy Serbian existence (Hatschikjan 216; Lendvai 261). Predictably, it's all a question of power. Failing to gain approval of their confederal model, the Republics of Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence on 25 June 1991, formally seceding from the Yugoslav Federation. Almost immediately, federal forces rushed into Slovenia and Croatia in an attempt to end their

bid for independence. On 15 October 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina adopted their own "memorandum on sovereignty," thus they too have been besieged by Serbian guerrillas and federal forces (Harden E12; Silber F11).

Because of its history and its make-up of varied ethnic groups, each seeking its own political identity, the dissolution of Yugoslavia was only a matter of time. By examining and thoroughly understanding the rhythms, patterns, and repetitions of the torrid and turbulent past that have conditioned the society, it is painfully obvious that, indeed, Yugoslavia was a 70-year-old mistake that now ceases to exist. Slovenia and Croatia are free and have been recognized as independent and sovereign states. Although the fiercest fighting continues there, Bosnia-Herzegovina is also recognized as independent. Macedonia, if it can ensure its territorial integrity, will also choose the path of independence. The Montenegrins and the populations of the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina are unlikely, over time, to remain under Serbia's authoritative rule and will eventually seek their own national self-interests.

Ironically, there have been those who predicted that the map of Europe in the twenty-first century would contain only seven countries: one large one named "Europe" and six smaller ones on the territory of the former Yugoslavia (Rusinow 143).

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