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## YUGOSLAVIA: THE PROCESS OF DISINTEGRATION

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### **The Idea of Yugoslavism**

Yugoslavia was created after World War I as the result of a number of events. Croatia and Slovenia, which were parts of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and were on the losing side of the war, were joined to Serbia, which was on the winning side. There was also a tremendous social movement occurring inside the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy that sought to bridge over those national divisions. Its supporters saw themselves as endangered by the Italians on one side and the Germans and Russians on the other side, and sought a state that would have the military power to prevent seizure of the territory.

Of no less importance was the idea of a common South Slavic political entity, a concept that was highly developed in both Croatia and Slovenia. Indeed, the idea of Yugoslavism was born in Croatia and was the leading element in Croatian nationalism. Another part of Croatian nationalism, however, was always very anti-Serbian and consequently anti-Yugoslav.

The unification of Yugoslavia was a unification of two different powers. On one side was a Serbian state which had been established a hundred years earlier and which had a military that had been part of a glorious victory in World War I. On the other side were entities which had no military or state organization, so Serbian King Alexander was actually able to dictate the constitution of newly-born Yugoslavia. The constitution called for a highly-centralized state, but from the very beginning there was serious political conflict, at first with the Croats, who were continuously asking for decentralization and the establishment of some kind of federation between Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Yugoslavia was made up of five South Slavic nations, each with all kinds of minorities. There were Albanians, which comprised a small majority in the south Serbian region of Kosovo, bordering Albania. There were German and Hungarian minorities. But the main South Slavic nations were concentrated on their respective territories. Unlike

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the Russian-dominated Soviet Union, there was never a single dominant nation in Communist Yugoslavia. Even the Croats never claimed that the Serbs were dominant.

### **The Legacy of World War II**

This issue of centralization, decentralization, federation, or unitary state remained on the agenda until August 1939 when there started a gradual process of decentralization and the beginnings of the creation of a federation. Unfortunately, due to World War II, the whole process stopped when Yugoslavia became the victim of German, Italian, Hungarian and Bulgarian military aggression. After two weeks of military resistance Yugoslavia was occupied and parcelized between the fascist powers. The Germans established the independent state of Croatia, to which Bosnia also belonged, based upon the extreme nationalist right wing, which represented only a small part of the Croatian population. However, it must be said that the Croats made no resistance to the German occupation of Croatia. Indeed, there was mass celebration when German troops arrived in Zagreb on April 14, 1941.

After the occupation began there was a continuing sense of resistance, at first unorganized, then manifested in the Chetniks — Serbian nationalist monarchist forces, and later in a partisan resistance led by the Communists. From their earliest beginnings these two resistance movements also waged an internal civil war.

Civil atrocities and genocide began to occur in the independent state of Croatia with the mass execution of Serbs. At first it was Serb intellectuals, but then it became mass genocide, spreading from village to village. Croats killed or imprisoned Serbs, gypsies and Jews. Mass executions were especially widespread in Bosnia and Hercegovina (then part of the Ustasha Croatian state). Some Moslem leaders supported the Ustasha state and there were Moslems among the Ustashes. The local Chetniks in Bosnia and Hercegovina were also involved in atrocities toward Moslem and Croat civilians.

From this mass of ethnic clashes and foreign occupation there emerged from Tito's partisans the only anti-fascist, all-Yugoslav force from Slovenia to Macedonia. When the war ended, the partisans, an umbrella for the Communists, made a more or less legal seizure of power. There were two elections. The Communists had no ethnic agenda but were able to bridge over all the diversities in Yugoslavia between Moslems, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics; between the various nationalities; and between regions completely different

economically.

Yugoslavia was a country that had been destroyed in the war — materially, physically, ideologically, and spiritually. Tito and the Communists promised that only they could modernize and industrialize the country via a planned economy, and they rebuilt Yugoslavia, especially ideologically and spiritually. They were able to put the ethnic atrocities of World War II behind them. Materially they set in motion an industrialization and urbanization process that was highly effective. The growth rate in Yugoslavia in the 1950s was more than 10 percent a year, comparable to South Korea or Israel. After Tito's break with Stalin and under the Truman Doctrine, Yugoslavia received enormous amounts of American aid. According to one American economic historian, American aid actually represented one-third of the Yugoslavian GNP. Roads were built with American loans and repaid to the Americans in highly inflated dinars. The American Embassy would eventually spend that money in Yugoslavia for various purposes. The Yugoslav military was fully equipped with American weapons and equipment without charge. In the 1960s, due to the Yugoslav position on the Vietnam War, the American Congress cancelled aid to Yugoslavia and they began using Russian equipment. But when I was in the army in 1977 they were still using American heavy artillery and trucks of Korean War vintage.

### **The Yugoslav Federation**

Post-World War II Yugoslavia was established as a federation, which proved to be really a mask. Until 1963 the federation constitution and all political and legal life were subordinate to the decisions of a group of people sitting around a table, the Politburo of the Communist party. The bosses would decide and everyone would do their duty; that was the way the system functioned.

Yet a multi-ethnic federation is able to function only if there is a system of checks and balances. Without that process, federation does not work. All the multi-ethnic federations in Europe which were created by the Communists — the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia — faded away with the change of regime. All of these federations disintegrated, including Yugoslavia, due to the fact that, on one hand, they were unable to integrate into the world market economy because of the very nature of communism, and, on the other hand, due to a one-party system and due to the hierarchical organization of the Communist party, the various kinds of intermediary arrangements which are typical of federations were never created.

### The Failure of Communism

In the 1950s, the power of the Communists was legitimized through the expectation of every Yugoslav that next year he would gain something more than he had this year — a radio, a refrigerator. Yet by 1961 the growth rate had fallen to zero as all kinds of problems involved in a planned economy surfaced.

In 1964, the gentlemen of the Politburo were unable to make a decision about investments among the various regions for the following year. There remained a high gap between developed regions such as Slovenia and underdeveloped regions such as Macedonia. When the Politburo was unable to reach a decision, they sought a neutral actor to make the decisions, namely, the market. Literally overnight it was decided to implement a free market economy in Yugoslavia. There was enormous unemployment as hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs, but the restructuring of the economy was begun.

As enterprises were given autonomy, management became responsible for economic success. This brought about the rise of a new economic and professional, educated elite who came to besiege the older generation. Faced with the double challenge of an enormous economic crisis, which hurt the uneducated peasants and blue-collar workers especially, and the rise of this new professional elite, the old guard decided to find a new basis for legitimacy.

In 1967 the decision was made to abolish the Yugoslav Communist party and instead every republic plus two autonomous provinces of the Serbian republic was to have its own Communist party. Everything to be decided in the federal arena was to be decided first in the republics. We must remember that Tito was still alive and was still the boss. This solution allowed him to select the people to be the representatives to any particular body in the federal framework. Yet this change meant constitutional changes in the federation as well.

The constitution of 1974 decreed that all private interests were illegitimate. The only legitimate interests were collective interests. Everybody became a member of a collective body and the collective bodies were to be represented on the board, in the market, and in politics. Practically, this meant some kind of contracted economy with no market but where everybody bargains for everything. It also meant that the enterprise structure was completely dissolved. Small groups of 8-10 people were established artificially, each having its own director, secretary, workers council — an enormous bureaucracy — who had to account for everything they

did. There were enormous clashes between people because everybody was accountable to everybody. On the other hand, politically, no one had any way to represent anybody. One elected a body in his neighborhood and those neighborhood bodies collectively elected the body in the communal municipality, etc. The consequence was the creation of informal, unelected groups who were really the political bosses, the cadres of the Communist party who selected the candidates. In the end there was no electoral process and everything was reduced to the nation. All kinds of interest conflicts were transformed into national conflicts.

The reaction of the politicians was to look for someone else to blame for the economic upheaval. It started with the Croats blaming the federal government for investments that caused the economic crisis in Croatia, which was really a crisis in all of Yugoslavia. The Serbs began to blame others as well.

The constitution of 1974 gave to the republics the rights of sovereign states, responsible for their own economies. This meant the creation of separate national economies with all the costs connected with a national economy. In Yugoslavia's case, these were multiplied eight times, and of course this change went unrecognized by the world market. Under this system enormous debts were run up for the country. Apparently, one became able to make a decision at the local level about acquiring additional debt. A situation developed where a local branch of any bank was able to make any kind of direct connection with a foreign bank.

On one hand, the constitution had a typical confederative element, but it was in this constitution that the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was responsible for the general interest and had the constitutional duty to represent the general interest. The constitution created all kinds of bodies, including the federal government, which were run on the basis of consensus. It meant in practice that every particular republic or autonomous province was able to block all decisions in the federal arena. It was not just that each had a veto right for a particular issue, but that every republic was able to block everything, not just the enactment of laws but the daily business of government. The system worked as long as Tito was alive because there was always one group that was able to claim that it was following Tito's wishes.

After Tito's death there was an attempt to democratize the country and through that democratization to make the federal system workable, but that attempt in the late 1980s came too late. For the past ten years Yugoslavia has lived with continual clashes between

particular oligarchies representing particular republics or nations, who, even at the level of the Communist party, were unable to make decisions about anything.

In 1990 Prime Minister Markovich attempted a reform program, seeking to promote integration in society by establishing a unitary Yugoslav market and eliminating the separate national economies. However, he was attacking the main source of power of the various national leaders. Markovich's reform program did not succeed for many reasons, but one of the most important was that the political will no longer existed for maintaining Yugoslavia in any form among the leading nationalists, who were the Communists in Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia. In 1969, a prescient American author had written that Yugoslavia was going to fall apart because the Communists were the leading ethnonationalists.

### **Yugoslavia Breaks Apart**

Slovenia's Communist party was the first to destroy itself, deciding that it was no longer able to continue to work as a Communist party, and opening the way to pluralism. As a consequence, the Slovenians became the first to hold elections in their own republic with no connection to elections for the federal parliament. Because of the constitutional blockade, federal elections could not be organized. Markovich did not insist on holding federal elections because of the deadlock over the question of whether the elections would be held according to the old election law or whether a new election law should be enacted allowing a multi-party system and constitutionally changing the whole way of electing representatives.

After Slovenia's elections came those of the Croats and the other respective republics. The outcome of the elections was not only that the nationalist parties won, but that ethnodemocracies instead of democracies were established in all of the republics. The whole political process now involved pluralism along ethnic lines. In actuality it meant that Yugoslavia ceased to exist as a political commonwealth or even as a political community from the time of the first election in Slovenia.

All kinds of ethnic problems rose to the surface, though not in Slovenia which is more than 90 percent Slovenian. There the Slovenes were convinced that by removing the stone of Yugoslavia from around their necks they would be able to recover economically after a few years and join the Common Market. All the other republics are very ethnically mixed, however, and ethnic feelings run high. So the Yugoslav state withered away, as Lenin predicted, but as the state withered

away, local militias and local warlords took power. There was no more fear of any kind of monopoly of weapons in the hands of the military and police and all the aggressions of human nature came out.

Serbian and Montenegrin leaders insisted on a solution to the deadlock along the lines of classic American federalism. The Croats and the Slovenes proposed a confederation, which was not serious and which they knew the Serbs would reject. Then Slovenia and Croatia unilaterally proclaimed their independence. In Slovenia the Yugoslav army intervened stupidly and were stopped by Slovenian resistance. Then the same scenario occurred in Croatia with secession and attack.

### **Bosnia: Moslems, Serbs and Croats**

The third internal war came in Bosnia, a very complicated issue which also started with a secession. Bosnia is ethnically mixed among three groups: Moslems, Serbs and Croats. Moslems are 43.7 percent, Serbs are 31.4, and Croats 17.3 percent; ten years ago it was Moslems 39.5 percent, Serbs 32 percent, and Croats 16.4 percent. The claim for independence for Bosnia after Yugoslavia ceased to exist provoked a war decided upon by the elites from above, against the wishes of the population. Only a very tiny minority of the population wanted war. In Bosnia and parts of Croatia where the war occurred there is a high percentage of mixed marriages. There were no separate quarters but the populations lived together in the same buildings. War is so brutal there because aggressive minorities feel they have no other way.

Croats are Catholic; Serbs are Orthodox; but Moslems are of both Croatian and Serbian origin. At least half of the Moslem population in Bosnia is still aware of their ethnic origin because their conversion to Islam was not for ideological reasons but rather to avoid slavery or worse. The old Serbian aristocracy converted during the Ottoman empire. On the other side, there is a 100-year-long tradition of anti-Serbian propaganda from the Croatian Catholic Church, and the claim that the Moslems are largely Croats of the Moslem faith.

After World War II Moslems declared themselves as Yugoslavs or nationally undeclared. For various political reasons, in the 1960s Tito adopted the idea that the Moslems had now become a nation. On the other hand, there are Albanians, Macedonians, and Serbs who are Moslems. Interestingly, the Serbs of Moslem faith are more or less highly integrated into Serbian society but were never accepted by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which pushed for them to be understood as

different from the Serbs. The Moslem Serbs used to be secular, but, similarly to the Arabs in Israel, they appear to be converting from communism to fundamentalism. There is a tiny minority including the political leadership which was always fundamentalist.

There is a potential danger in creating a Moslem state in Bosnia. It was once Turkish policy to create a Moslem state in Bosnia and they attempted to do so at a cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. The Arab states may have huge social problems of their own, but they will always be ready to give an enormous amount of money for such a purpose.

The Bosnian Serbs or the Bosnian Croats are somehow seen as less Bosnian than the Bosnian Moslems. In the West one understands the Bosnians only as Moslems. The reality is that there are Bosnian Moslems who want to have their own independent state, but so do the Bosnian Serbs. In Bosnia separation is possible only between Serbs and Croats but not between Serbs, Croats and Moslems. A balance of power is not possible because always there are two who will unite against the third.

The Serbian ambition in Bosnia is, if they can, to control two-thirds of the territory, based on the Bosnian Serb claim of ownership of 64 percent of all the property. The Moslems live in the towns in Bosnia, while the Serbs live in the villages. The Serbs would probably agree to a smaller entity if it had a corridor to Serbia. The main basis of their claim is a demand for the right of self-determination.

The Croats want to establish an independent Croatian state and also seek to gain at least half of Bosnia. It was part of their independent state of Croatia in World War II. Some even claim the whole of Bosnia in order to reestablish a Greater Croatia which would be strong enough to balance Serbia. A central problem of Yugoslavia was the obvious imbalance in power, with the frictions surrounding the numerical and military dominance of the Serbs.

#### **Yugoslavia Today**

The rump Yugoslavia of Serbia and Montenegro is still repeating the problems of the old Yugoslavia. It is an ethnically and religiously mixed state, with Serbs accounting for less than two-thirds of the population. Serbia, like all of the former republics, is now governed through a process of crude centralization. Instead of privatization one has nationalization. So even without the war, the situation is irrational and very complex. All sides appear to actually be doing the same thing, substituting ethnonationalistic totalitarianism

for Communist totalitarianism.

This new totalitarianism is even personally composed of the old Communists. Croatian President Turjeman, in one dispute with Serbian President Milocivic, declared, "Our government has more party members than has your whole central committee." (Milocivic had just renamed the party in Serbia "Socialist" from "Communist.") In Croatia the new political ruling class is composed of the old Communists and old fascists. That, as Croatian President Turjeman said, is the most developed democracy in the world.

Yugoslavia today is under U.N. sanctions, which are completely destroying two communities which were of much importance for the Western world — the private entrepreneurs and the Western-oriented technocrats. Sanctions means that in Yugoslavia one can receive only letters. I have not yet been able to receive in Belgrade copies of my own book published in the United States. It means a total intellectual blockade, forcing the population to be informed from only one side.

The blockade was very effective in the sense that it eliminated private small and middle-range enterprises because it is very hard to sell anything. It was also very successful in creating a mafia-style economy such as is common in Latin America where smuggling something illegal becomes the major economic activity. Everybody knows how to do it but there are certain problems. At every crossing into Yugoslavia stands a customs official of the European Community. In the beginning, everybody was able to bribe the official, but now it is highly organized and controlled by the political parties, including those in the opposition. It also means that now one has to pay much more than the usual bribery.

#### **The Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia**

In what used to be Yugoslavia there were an estimated 5-8,000 Jews. Counting up the total membership of the individual Jewish communities, there were 5-6,000, but some 1,000 community members were non-Jews, including wives and other family members. Interestingly, the number of Jews has actually increased in the last few years. There are now 2,000 Jews in today's Yugoslavia, while before the war there were only 1,300. In Belgrade in the last two years the Jewish community has had almost 800 newcomers. In one typical example, the mother was a refugee Jew from Odessa who came to Yugoslavia after World War II. Her daughter has a Montenegrin family name, never had anything to do with Jews, and did not know

what Shabbat is. One day she came to request membership in the Jewish community because it means a potential escape route, a way out. Due to the ethnic conflicts and wars it is today a privilege to be a Jew in Yugoslavia, a very ironic situation for a Jew in Europe.

Serbia today has a federation of Jewish communities. Croatia also has its own federation, as does Bosnia. In Skopje, Macedonia, there are 200 Jews who are still silent members of the Serbian federation because JDC money is involved.

The Zagreb Jewish community in Croatia cooperates with Croatian President Turjeman. Until May 1992 the Belgrade Jewish community was close to the Serbian government and the president of the community was a member of the government-supported Jewish-Serbian Friendship Society. Then there were elections and a list which supported an independent Jewish politics won a landslide victory. Belgrade now has a politically neutral community that is open to cooperation with all sides.

All the warring sides want to have warm relations with the Jews. Closeness to Jews has now become the mark of legitimacy even for anti-Semites like Turjeman, enabling them to advance their own international acceptance in the process. As real anti-Semites they believe that there is a powerful Jewish lobby and that

Jews really rule the world. Closeness to Jews also makes it easier to claim internationally that the other side is fascist or undemocratic.

On the other hand, anti-Semitism remains present, though confined more or less to the press, but one day it might become very important, completely independent of how many Jews there are. For example, in Slovenia there are altogether 24 Jews. In 1989, at a time when it was obvious that they were going to proclaim independence, a Slovenian weekly published *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* with government money. It was serialized week by week for six months. Enormous numbers of anti-Semitic letters arrived in the Slovenian press as a result. Last year the same publisher announced the publication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. So anti-Semitism in Slovenian politics, even without Jews, has its place in society much like anti-Semitism in Poland.

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