

Beyond "Ancient Hatreds"

by **Stephen Schwartz**

What really happened to Yugoslavia

WITH THE DEATH OF DICTATOR Josip Broz Tito in 1980 and the crisis of European communism beginning a half-decade later, Yugoslavia — a "country" assembled after World War I from pieces of the former Austro-Hungary, Turkish possessions "liberated" in 1912-13, and the former monarchies of Serbia and Montenegro — came face to face with all the fault lines of the former states. As Yugoslavia broke violently into pieces in the 1990s, the first explanation on the lips of most commentators was this: "ancient hatreds," a phrase that quickly became a cliché.

Thus, viewers of television news as well as readers of print media were told for the nth time that the Serbs hate the Croats because of what the latter did to them in World War II; or, going further back, that the Serbs hate the Albanians for taking over Kosovo, which the Serbs consider their heartland because of the battle fought there in 1389. Or consider this:

swift, on horseback, the barbarians ride to the attack;
an enemy with horses as numerous as their flying arrows;
and they leave the whole land depopulated.
|Some flee, and with their plowed furrows
unguarded, know their fields will be despoiled.
The poor products of their labor, in creaking carts
are driven with their flocks, all the poor peasant owns.
Among the refugees, some are seized as captives
and with their arms bound, march to an unknown fate;
they cast a sad eye behind them, at their homes and farms.
Some fall in agony, pierced by barbed arrows;
for the metal head of the shaft is loaded with poison.
What the barbarians cannot steal, they destroy
and a flame rages through the innocent houses.

Thus the Roman poet Ovid (*Tristia*, III, x.), describing a raid 2,000 years ago by the Sarmatians, considered Slavs by some historians, against the ancestors of today's Albanians.

The "ancient hatreds" argument furnishes a convenient hook for nightly news commentary on atrocities. It has certain obvious merits. It would be absurd to deny that the Balkans, like much of Eastern Europe, have remained outside the mainstream of European history, and that their penchant for brutality in politics and war indicates that, in some ways, some of these cultures remain unassimilated to Western values and attitudes. Further, it is clear that violence in the region has a repetitive character, going back even before the Slavic intrusion in the sixth century A.D.

In addition to its merits, the "ancient hatred" argument has a certain convenience for some of those who embrace it. It assumes, implicitly or explicitly, the moral equivalence of the warring parties, with "a pox on all your houses" its apparent policy corollary. This view has a natural appeal for those who do not wish to take sides.

But is the presence of "ancient hatreds," legendary resentments, and atavistic habits really sufficient to explain the extent and intensity of brutality in the Yugoslav war of the 1990s? This is somewhat akin to blaming Gothic paganism for Nazism. The distance from cultural divergence to mass murder remains a long one for most societies, no matter how backward.

No, these "ancient hatreds" could not and did not combust spontaneously. The blaze was prepared, lit, and stoked by the Serbian political leadership in a massive assault against its neighbors, planned and executed to unite "Great Serbia" behind its communist rulers. In pursuit of this end, Serbian ruler Slobodan Milosevic would effectively revive an authentically fascist style of ethnic incitement, one with a terrifying potential for the destabilization of European — and even international — civil society.

Moreover, there is no equivalence between Milosevic and the political leaders he confronted in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and, eventually, Kosovo. The Slovenes under ex-communist turned free-marketeer Milan Kucan had consistently acted in only one interest: the efficient integration of the former Yugoslav "republics" into Europe. Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, as devious and corrupt a politician as Milosevic, kept his country in a kind of "banana republic" semi-dictatorship, imposed policies leading to human rights violations on its own territory as well as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and often appeased Milosevic. But with all his many faults, Tudjman acted defensively and opportunistically. The Bosnian Muslims, for their part, never engaged in the wholesale human rights violations characteristic of Serbian and Croatian military operations. The Kosovar Albanians maintained a position of nonviolence for 10 years before they took up arms, though they faced a constantly rising level of Serbian police and paramilitary atrocities.

As for "ancient hatreds," the divergence between West and East, it is all too obvious, has marked the Balkans for 1,500 years. Yugoslavia represented an attempt, probably doomed to failure in any event, to bridge the gap. Laid over the bedrock of ethnic rivalry, however, a network of thoroughly up-to-date grievances was visible, though little noticed outside Yugoslavia. These resentments were perpetuated and exacerbated because of policy issues as current as any in the world. The real, immediate reasons Yugoslavia broke up so horrifically come not from the poetry of long-ago battles, or recitations of wartime atrocities under the Nazis, or from the plotting of German bankers or American militarists, but from the dry and seemingly sterile world of public policy. These reasons involve attitudes toward property and entrepreneurship; the legacy of centralist statism in government; and tax policy.

Yugoslavia at the time of its breakup was marked by the widely disparate levels of readiness among its constituent components for membership in the

modern world. Serbia under Milosevic lagged far behind the others. The 1990s war and brutality in the Balkans were a product of Milosevic's decision to embrace war and brutality as the solution to the problem of Serbia's own backwardness.

Make war, not money

IN A DISCUSSION EARLY IN 1999 with several American advisors resident in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a Bosnian Muslim professor of library science, Kemal Bakarsic of the University of Sarajevo, recalled his experiences in that besieged city in 1992. Bakarsic was employed at the National and University Library, which along with the Oriental Institute was shelled by the Serbs and burned for three days early in the war. In the week after, a fine ash like snow fell upon the city. Tens of thousands of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew, and Bosnian manuscripts were destroyed, along with thousands of printed books and periodicals. Bakarsic himself, an expert on the unique cultural artifact known as the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, a Hebrew manuscript created in Spain and brought to Bosnia, was working at the library when the catastrophe occurred.

The world condemned the Serbian destruction of the Bosnian national library as an act of vandalism aimed at destroying the record of the Muslim presence in the Balkans. But Bakarsic's interpretation of this act of evil was distinctive; he saw it as driven less by ethnic hatred and an instinct for pure destruction than by a specific economic outlook. The Serbs, he said, mainly wanted to destroy the *defterler*, or Ottoman Turkish property registers. The aim of this, according to him, was not merely to wipe out proof that Muslims had once dominated the country, but, even more, to destroy evidence that Serbs had once held property alongside Muslims. "The *defterler* didn't just list the property of Muslims, but of Croats, Serbs, and others, as well," he noted. "They showed that coexistence between the three communities had always existed here. And they showed the extent of Serb property ownership, so that the Serbs were destroying their own history as well as that of the Muslims."

The destruction of Kosovar Albanian property records, along with personal identification and vehicle registration, was also a prominent feature of the recent Serb assault on Kosovo. But while the media universally viewed such actions as an effort to negate the legitimacy of the Albanian presence in Kosovo, they failed to see that behind the burning of property documents lay more than ultranationalism; there was also an historical and cultural attitude toward property in general. Very early in the Yugoslav conflict in the 1990s, some observers did point out the legacy of economic and social disparities between Serbia, on the one hand, and its original victims, Slovenia and Croatia, on the other. But because these differences were elusive, were obscured by the role of Serbia in controlling the Yugoslav economy, and led those who discussed them publicly to be condemned as anti-Serb if not racist, the topic was never pursued as it ought to have been.

Nonetheless, the economic lag between Slovenia and Croatia, to the West, and Serbia, in the East, is the real source of the Yugoslav dilemma. And this gap, whatever its statistical configuration from year to year, grew out of certain long-standing cultural assumptions.

Consider only the briefest sketch of the former country's history. Yugoslavia spanned the West-East border delimited in 393 A.D. by the Roman emperor Theodosius, who divided the empire along the river Neretva. What would become, after the Slavic invasions, the Slovene and Croat lands was included in the Western empire; the much-later Serbia was in Eastern territory. Bosnia and the coasts of Montenegro and Albania were considered somewhere in the middle.

This cultural split would prove far more significant for the history of the Balkans than the later cleavage between Christian inhabitants and Muslim governors. The areas that became Slovenia and northern Croatia were absorbed into the domain of Charlemagne, fell under the ecclesiastical authority of Rome rather than Byzantium, and were swept (especially Slovenia) by Protestantism as well as the Counter-Reformation. The Croats of the Dalmatian shore came under Venetian rule, and, while distinguishing themselves as mariners and seaborne merchants, also participated in the penetration of the Slavonic world by the Renaissance. Both the Slovenes and Croats were ruled by the Habsburgs; they were briefly conquered and illuminated in the direction of revolutionary romanticism by Napoleon, but they were restored to Vienna and carried into the age of capitalism under the stewardship of Austrian and Hungarian industrialists. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Slovenia and Croatia had both produced wealthy peasant classes, prosperous commercial strata, and a healthy local tradition of trade and investment. Their future evolution as bourgeois nations seemed assured.

The cultural heritage of Serbia could scarcely have been more different. Having fallen under the Byzantine and later Orthodox religious order, Serbia never experienced a Reformation or Counter-Reformation. Essentially landlocked, it never fostered seamanship or foreign commerce. And then, in the fourteenth century, came what amounted to a wholesale disaster, at least from the viewpoint of European-style economic development. In the aftermath of the Kosovo battle, Serbia was conquered by the Turks. Trade in the Ottoman empire was concentrated on the imperial capital, the former Byzantium, and the caravan routes to Anatolia, Persia, and central Asia. To the west, the lesser Ottoman trade routes went from Venetian-Croatian Dubrovnik to Sarajevo in Bosnia, and from there, as well as from Shkoder and Durres in Albania, to Skopje and Selanik (Salonica) in Macedonia. Serbia, aside from Kosovo, which stood astride the Sarajevo-Salonika and Shkoder-Skopje routes, was largely passed by.

Serbia's commerce never developed beyond local trade, and, commensurate with that, a domestic business or investment class emerged only very late. Overall, Serb culture has treated warfare as the manly profession, preferable to commercial activity. Milosevic himself enunciated this view early in the 1990s in a speech directed against the Slovenes, who had enriched themselves by sublicensing Western consumer goods for sale to the Yugoslav market. Unlike the Slovenes, Milosevic declared defiantly, Serbs were not good at producing things — "but we are good at fighting," he asserted.

Serbia did not begin its break with Ottoman domination until 1804, and for long afterward, its economic character was Asiatic rather than European. In Slovenia and Croatia, and even in the Ottoman remnant of Bosnia, well-established ecclesiastical and political structures promoted the stability and expansion of farming; inherited land remained in the hands of the extended family, which sought to improve and expand its holdings. Although landless peasants emigrated from Slovenia and Croatia in considerable numbers, seeking their fortunes in, among other places, Gold Rush era California and, later, in the mines and factories of Belgium, France, and the American Midwest, those who possessed land held to it tenaciously, and organized associations and parties to defend their interests. In post-Ottoman Serbia, by contrast, the lack of an effective legal and social framework generated anxiety among the peasants, distrust within families, and ever-smaller divisions of landholdings among heirs. The Serb peasant defended his interests by maintaining a nuclear family on his diminished property, for which the physical labor of one's wife and children was the only available form of investment. Almost from the beginning of its national independence from the Ottomans, Serbia suffered a crisis in agriculture that continues even today.

Thus, the difference between West and East among Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs involved a great deal more than the theological argument over the authority of the bishop of Rome as pope, or the use of the Cyrillic as opposed to the Latin alphabet. For Serbs, property was most often a basis for

conflict, either with family members or with landlords (the latter who had lately been Muslims), rather than for personal and collective improvement (except by violent expropriation of the same Muslim landlords). Entrepreneurship involved peddling and market haggling, and was suspect. When capitalism arrived in the Balkans the first time around, at the end of the past century, the Slovenes and Croats were well-prepared for it. But the Serbian bourgeoisie had arrived late on the historical scene, and its development as a class was also belated.

All of this was visible in embedded attitudes toward property. The burning of property registers was a symbolic expression of Serbianism, expressing not only a radical protest against the long Muslim domination, but also a deep ambivalence about the broader social and legal reality beyond the nuclear family. Not only were Ottoman land records suspect, as an institution of a foreign ruler; all records, all papers, all law outside that of the family became an object of mistrust.

The backwardness of Serbian agriculture, and Serbian hostility to post-traditional concepts of property, aggravated other problems caused by the belated entry of the Serbian bourgeoisie onto the stage of world history. But the irony important to foreigners, as well as Serbs, was that if Serbia had problems dealing with the first era of dramatic capitalist expansion into the Balkans, from 1850 to 1900, such problems were magnified beyond measure at the time of the most recent such expansion, in the 1990s.

Empty-handed in modern times

TITO'S YUGOSLAVIA, through the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, had flourished as the beneficiary of a kind of dual international welfare. Put simply, the Yugoslavs were paid by the Russians, in hard currency, for construction and other sophisticated projects Soviet socialism had failed to master, while the U.S. subsidized the Yugoslav military on the presumption that in a war between the Warsaw Pact and nato, Yugoslavia would side with the West. Tito himself, a wily Habsburg military officer by professional training, added two policy innovations, unknown to the rest of the communist world, to the mix. He encouraged Yugoslavs in the millions to emigrate — to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, even the U.S. and Australia, and to send as much of their earnings back home as they could. In addition, he threw the country open to foreign tourists, so that families, notably on the Dalmatian coast, could collect millions of d-marks in room rentals every year.

But the real basis of Yugoslavia's seeming success was dual subsidies from West and East. After the psychological defeat of Moscow by Poland's Solidarity and the Polish pope, John Paul II, in the early 1980s, something curious happened in Eastern Europe. Soviet Russia itself continued for some time on its triumphalist path, convinced that the global correlation of forces favored socialism, and that it could make up for what it might lose in Poland by subverting the American backyard in Nicaragua, Grenada, and El Salvador, as well as by its adventures in Africa and Southeast Asia. Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the other westernmost European communist states underwent, more or less rationally, the slow and steady emergence of a non-communist civil society. Nobody in Moscow, Budapest, East Berlin, or Prague spoke openly of the end of communism, just as nobody did in Washington. But in the former cities, the intelligentsia began hoping, silently, for a closure that had long been inconceivable.

In Yugoslavia, by contrast — particularly in Serbia — the 1980s produced the beginning of a real panic. Tito died in 1980, but few Yugoslavs felt fear, or expressed their fears if they had them, about the internal forces that might lead to the collapse of Yugoslav communism. Titoite communism was the most liberal, most open, most successful Marxist-Leninist regime. The onset of mass anxiety had little to do with immediate problems inside the country and everything to do with the awareness that, although the West had not seemed to notice it and the East would not say it aloud, Russian communism entered its death throes with the pope's survival of an assassination attempt. Bolshevism was doomed; and with the end of Bolshevism, Yugoslavia's dual international welfare payments would end as well. Russia would no longer need Yugoslavs to build factories and the U.S. would no longer need the Yugoslav Army as a bulwark against a Soviet invasion of Europe.

This realization struck the Serbs with special force because Serbia — in marked contrast to other parts of the former state — had little to bring to the table of what would eventually be called the "new world order." Slovenia, for example, would prosper even without support from Washington and Moscow; its local communist leadership had already given up Marxist economics, had integrated Slovenia with the Austrian and Italian economies, and, as previously noted, had made the country a producer of quality consumer goods for the rest of the Yugoslav market. Croatia, too, expected few problems in the absence of foreign aid; it had not only a spectacular and largely unexploited tourist potential, one whose transformation could be expected to fuel prosperity in the same way tourism remade Spain in the 1950s, but also a large diaspora that would continue to add to domestic income through d-mark (now euro) remittances. Even Bosnia-Herzegovina was relatively well-prepared for entry into the new world, thanks to the modernization of its agriculture and its links with the Islamic nations.

But Serbia? Aside from the superficial cultural sophistication of Belgrade, Serbia had very little to offer the new world. While Slovenia was producing computer peripherals and the Croats were planning resort hotels and the Bosnians were getting rich by exporting agricultural products, Serbia's economy rested on the major assets it had possessed since the beginning of monarchist Yugoslavia at the end of World War I: the Yugoslav state bureaucracy, the army, and the police. The only value added to this store of wealth by the Tito era consisted in communist-style state enterprises. And this bad situation was made even worse by certain educational disparities. For while Slovenes and Croats tended to get degrees in engineering, the hard sciences, and medicine, Serbs flocked to careers as state functionaries in the cultural as well as administrative fields. Indeed, Belgrade in 1989 may have had more unemployed structuralist film critics than any other city in the world.

It was raw fear for the future of a statist, centralist Serbia in a free-market world that transformed the Serbian communist organization into an agency of ultranationalist incitement to violence. The Slovene communists thoroughly and effectively remade themselves as free-marketeers, and the Croat and Bosnian Muslim communists were prepared to surrender power to elected non-communist parties, because they all knew they had professional, economic, and political options as something other than communist bureaucrats. That is, they were willing to exchange power for property; but for the Serb communists, loss of power meant loss of everything. There was no economic buffer to make the transition easier for them.

The Serb communists could not trust entrepreneurship, which they equated with corruption, and private property rights, which they associated with injustice, as the foundation of their future. Lacking assets in property, they were, again, nothing without power. But as we have seen in the statesmanship of Slobodan Milosevic, who came to embody their desperate hopes, they were not much even in possession of power. Milosevic, for his part, was not the inventor, but rather the instrument, of Serbia's "response" to its crisis, namely the attempt to unite Serbia by launching wars against its Western Yugoslav rivals. The real originators of this reaction, as it turns out, were literary intellectuals, including virtually all of Serbia's former professional dissidents and "humanist Marxists."

These included, for example, the novelists Dobrica Cosic, whose series of leaden narratives of Serbian suffering in World War I amounted to manuals for nationalist indoctrination, and Vuk Draskovic. Draskovic would later play the dissident card himself, but was originally known for a novel, *The Knife* (*Nož*), itself a febrile pamphlet justifying violence against Yugoslav Muslims. Its success as a best-seller in the mid-1980s was one of the first signposts in the direction of hell to appear in the country's common life. The main gambit by this layer of frightened intellectuals, however, was the so-called *Draft Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts*, which was "leaked" to the press in 1986. In this document, Serbia's intellectual elite signed on to the theory that Serbia, which had ruled over Yugoslavia for 70 years, was actually an eternal victim of the more sophisticated, Westernized nations within Yugoslavia. The Belgrade press, once celebrated far and wide for its accuracy and independence in reporting on the Soviet bloc, became filled with paranoid propaganda about the threat of Muslim fundamentalists, Albanian gangsters, and recalcitrant Croat fascists to the security of the Serb nation.

Indeed, the role of the Serb intelligentsia in the 1980s revival of ultranationalism was itself a sign of the disparity between West and East within Yugoslavia. Slovenia, by contrast, produced virtually no nationalist intellectuals. In Croatia, a generation of patriotic writers and political theorists — exemplified by the poet Vlado Gotovac, the publisher Slavko Goldstein, and the civic activists Marko Veselica and Savka Dabčević-Kucar — had distinguished themselves for their defense of Croatian literary and cultural claims. Gotovac, for example, had nearly been murdered in a Yugoslav prison, and Veselica was an internationally-known human rights figure. But when these Western-oriented Croat intellectuals saw Franjo Tuđman, the retired communist general whom they had once considered a dissident companion, turn in the direction of nationalist extremism, they took their distance from him and became leaders of the Croatian antinationalist opposition. No such phenomenon occurred in Serbia, which has yet to produce a repudiation of nationalism among its intellectuals.

The lesson of Serbian history is that political power in the hands of a weak and backward ruling class, one incapable of making itself an effective bourgeoisie, is much more harmful for the general interest than is a robust and self-confident bourgeoisie itself. Had they spent more time in comparative historical study, Western political scientists might have noticed ominous parallels with the case of Yugoslavia, in which the productive and entrepreneurial Slovenes, Croats, and Bosnians were ruled by a parasitical and anti-entrepreneurial Serbia. One such resemblance was to monarchist Yugoslavia up to 1941. But a far more disturbing precedent would have been Spain in 1936, where the industrialized Basque Country and Catalonia groaned under the statist, taxing regime of the economically stunted Castile — a Castile which, like Serbia, had historically exalted military careers over commerce. In Spain, of course, the disparity between the center and the periphery had contributed mightily to the coming of a civil war in which some 2 million people lost their lives.

The Serbification of everything

SERBIA ALSO RESEMBLED CASTILE in its Jacobin attitude toward nationality — its belief that all South Slavs, comprising Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, and, before 1945, Macedonians, should consider themselves, in their essential being, as Serbs. This conception reflects the impact of the French revolutionary-rationalist state on Europe and the widespread nineteenth century belief that large nation-states based on one "people" could be forged out of varying local identities. French centralist nationalism spread to Hungary, Germany, and Italy, and it was inevitable that it would profoundly affect the South Slavic region.

Thus Serb national ideologists of 150 years ago adopted the slogan of a folk scholar, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, who proclaimed, "Serbs All and Everywhere." In this theory, Slovenes and Croats were Serbs who had been Catholicized and Germanized; Bosnian Muslims were Serbs forced into Islam; even Macedonians, who spoke a Bulgarian idiom obviously distinct from Serbian, became Serbified. A faction of Montenegrins accommodated this theory by proclaiming their Serbianism as indistinguishable from that of Serbs elsewhere, even though, from a cultural and linguistic perspective, Montenegrins, Bosnian Serbs, Serbs from Vojvodina (then under Hungary), and Serbs from Serbia proper differ from one another as much as do Americans from Massachusetts, Louisiana, California, and Tennessee.

This inclusive Serbism might have succeeded had it been based on the essentially tolerant, melting-pot mentality that produced an American national identity. But it was not. Rather, it was based on ethnic narcissism: Only Orthodox Serbs deserved to exercise power in the South Slavic state created, it was said, by Serbs alone. Croats, by refusing to give up their Catholicism and their local traditions, were deemed traitorous agents of the hereditary Habsburg enemy; Bosnian Muslims, by cleaving to Islam, were obviously servants of the old Ottoman oppressor; Slovenes, who had never had a link with Serbia, were irrelevant marginals, sold out to the Vatican, who should be excluded from consideration if they would not bend the neck. And Macedonian nationalists, as well as the Albanians from Kosovo (the latter constituting the third largest national grouping in Yugoslavia from the beginning, in the 1920s), were terrorist interlopers who deserved only to be exterminated. Behind all this lurked a Serbian Orthodox theology that viewed Catholics and Muslims as demons, and even Macedonians and some Montenegrins (who were Orthodox but wanted their own churches) as schismatic rebels requiring punishment.

Long before France refined the concept of a single national identity defined by a centralist state, the Castilian monarchy in Spain spent at least 400 years attempting to assimilate the Basques and Catalans, with little success. Germany, although united in the late nineteenth century, had never seen a serious attempt to force the abandonment of local cultural identity; nor had Italy. And even in Jacobin France, Brittany and other regions proved extraordinarily resistant to forcible cultural homogenization. Serbia's leaders should have learned from these examples, but they ignored them. Instead, during monarchist Yugoslavia, before 1941, they chose as a model Greece, which imposed a national identity by expelling and killing Turks and forcibly suppressing its own Albanian and Macedonian minorities. After 1945, even as Tito broke with Stalin, Serbian communists looked to the Stalinist practice of compulsory Russification for inspiration in their treatment of, above all, the Kosovar Albanians.

Tito, who was half-Croat and half-Slovene, attempted at many turns to limit the power of the Serbian elite in Yugoslav public life. But he allowed Serbia to retain a traditional influence in the army, the police, and the state bureaucracy. After all, so long as Belgrade was the capital of Yugoslavia, no other outcome was very likely.

The lopsided Serbian domination of Yugoslavia, even under Tito, was visible in many places. In 1989, Yugoslavia's army was the fourth largest in Europe, and its officer corps was 70 percent Serb. Serbia relied on revenues taxed from the more economically productive regions to support its (largely Serbian) central government. Furthermore, every d-mark accumulated by the sale of Slovenian skis or the rental of rooms in Dalmatia had to go through the Belgrade banks, once again providing an opportunity for looting by taxation. In 1991, Milošević rubbed the inequity of the situation into his subjects' faces when the Serbian central bank, which had already inflated the Yugoslav national currency almost beyond belief, unilaterally seized all the private foreign currency accounts in the country. It seems almost too obvious to mention that the prospective loss of tax revenue, with the prospect of greater Slovenian, Croatian, and Bosnian autonomy, was as much a stimulus to Milošević and his men as any ethnic or religious issue.

Serbia's rage at such an eventuality was most visible in its destructive strategy toward the constitution of the Yugoslav Federation. For Serbia never acted to preserve the federation; rather, by refusing to surrender the rotating federal presidency to the moderate (and later anti-Tudjman) Croat Stipe Mesic, in 1991, Serbia forcibly liquidated the federation. This came at a time when Slovenia and Croatia still advocated a looser Yugoslav (con)federation rather than independence, and when the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina, notwithstanding hair-raising Belgrade propaganda about Islamic fundamentalism, were clearly reluctant to consider the breakup of the existing arrangement.

To understand what happened in Yugoslavia, imagine a United States in which Maryland and Virginia, because they surround the national capital, tax the rest of the country to support their local budgets; in which only residents of those two states have any chance at a military career, and only historical figures from those states are publicly praised as national heroes. The consequences for America, one can speculate, would be no less bloody.

What Serbia had, and what it didn't

WHY, ONE MIGHT ASK, have the Baltic states, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia survived communism so much better than Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and, of course, Serbia? The first and most obvious explanation is that Nordic (specifically, Scandinavian and German) economic penetration of the former brought about a certain irreversible progress. But that is an explanation freighted with risk for most Western intellectuals, who are loath to appear as defenders of Teutonic imperialism.

The second explanation, nearly as obvious, involves the role of Catholic and Protestant Christianity in promoting a certain limited, but nonetheless real, pluralism, which seems necessary for the development of enterprise. Greek and Slavonic Orthodoxy, by contrast, fits remarkably well with a totalistic view of nationality, as well as of the state. Orthodox theology posits the nation, the church, and the state as a single organ (much as Lenin viewed the proletariat, the Communist Party, and the "workers' state" as a single entity) — an outlook that is arguably an impediment to the cultural pluralism and entrepreneurship necessary for success in the modern world. How do we imagine changing such attitudes, held by many millions of people? Greece, the Orthodox exception, is entrepreneurial if not culturally pluralistic; this seems to suggest some alternative outcome is possible. But the Greeks, one also feels compelled to observe, were a maritime and commercial nation a thousand years before they became Byzantine and Orthodox.

The final enigma of the Yugoslav experience has to do with the Serbian view of modernity and of Serbia's own place within it. Serbia has always seen itself as a Balkan vanguard of the civilized, the contemporary, the progressive, and the modern. This conviction was visible no less in its adoption of Soviet socialism than in its embrace of Jacobin nationalism. But it also was an expression of the belated and handicapped development of the Serbian elite, which has always striven too hard to catch up with the world, and has always failed.

When Serbia set up public schools in which all instruction was in Serbian, and from which Kosovar Albanians withdrew their children, the attitude in Belgrade was one of righteous political correctness: "We set up free schools for them — they who don't want to educate their daughters anyway. We offered to teach them the Serbian language, part of the great Slavic family of millions of speakers, but they hewed to their reactionary, traditional culture!" Serbs were flabbergasted that Westerners would side with the "clannish, patriarchal, primitive Albanians" against the modern, urbane, sophisticated Serbs. During the Bosnian war, in an apparent paradox, Serb irregulars were urged to attack Bosnian Muslims with the argument that the Serbs' grandparents had been poor peasants in leather britches and barefoot, while the Muslims' forefathers were rich landlords whose wives wore silk pantaloons and velvet shoes. "Progressivism" and resentment of private property in Serbia, along with the cult of "anti-imperialist" national liberation, produced complete impunity in the robbery, rape, and mass murder of the "backward" communities.

Something necessary for success in the contemporary world was missing in Serbia, and the lack thereof undermined the Yugoslav project from the beginning. That something, which seems absent throughout the Eastern Slavic world, is elusive, and does not have a name that immediately springs to mind.

It is not a matter of a European outlook per se, because we see in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo that communicants of an "Eastern" religion, Islam, who hew to Ottoman Turkish (i.e., Asiatic) cultural traditions, possess it. We could call it, as I have above, "free-market pluralism," tracing it back to the Catholic and Protestant transformations of Europe. But perhaps the best description of this ineffable cultural element was provided 144 years ago by the Russian liberal Aleksandr Herzen, who wrote as follows about the Slavic East, and an earlier encounter with modernity, in his 1855 work, *From the Other Shore*: "The revolution of Peter the Great replaced the obsolete squirearchy of Russia — with a European bureaucracy; everything that could be copied from the Swedish and German laws, everything that could be taken over from the free municipalities of Holland into our half-communal, half-absolutist country, was taken over; but the unwritten, the moral check on power, the instinctive recognition of the rights of man, of the rights of thought, of truth, could not be and were not imported."

Yugoslavia collapsed for reasons Madison or Burke would have fully understood. And its downfall is a lesson more for public philosophers than for military experts or ethnologists. It is one Americans should never forget.

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