



Croatian guardists remove their dead comrades in an ongoing civil war

The conflict in Yugoslavia seems different from explosions of nationalism in the Soviet Union. Here was a state with a long-standing socialist market economy and with real autonomy written into its federal constitution. So why the nationalist outbursts?

Public opinion in Western Europe has been swung solidly behind Croatia and its small western neighbour Slovenia, also asserting its independence. Germany in particular is willing to recognise Croatian independence.

NATIONAL UNITY

The Croats see a plan to carve Greater Serbia out of their territory. The Serbs say they are fighting for national unity and to protect Serbs in enclaves in Croatia from massacre. They are willing to recognise Croatian independence – but not in the Serb enclaves.

Unlike in the Soviet Union, this bitter nationalist feud cannot have been caused by the sudden release of control by central authorities. The republics already

Yugoslavia: a federation in tatters

Yugoslavia is breaking up in bitter conflict between its two main federal republics. What went wrong? A

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had extensive autonomy, in all but foreign policy and defence. Nor can the worsening economic position be the sole cause.

The reasons may be sought in a federal state system which combined economic decentralisation and the market economy with regional political independence, and so made it difficult for the central

government to overcome the economic and social divide in the country. At the same time, the lack of political pluralism prevented the growth within the country of parties with sectional interests.

The Yugoslav state was set up after the first world war to bring about a long held ideal of the peo-

ple of the region to form a South Slav federation. From the outset, the equality of the Serbs, Croats and the Slovenes was guaranteed, at least on paper.

The western part of the country – Croatia and Slovenia – had been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Their tradition, culture and orientation was to the Christian West, while Serbia and other parts of Yugoslavia had been part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Yet enough of a common Slav culture was shared to keep alive the idea of a South Slav nation.

Almost immediately after its foundation, there were nationalistic stirrings in Croatia and calls for independence. The same arguments were used as now – that the economic imbalance meant that hard-working Croats were underpinning the underdeveloped regions, and particularly Serbia.

SECOND WORLD WAR

Then came the second world war. The fierce guerilla struggle led by Josip Broz Tito against the Nazis was a major unifying factor, bringing into one force the many ethnic, language and cultural groups.

In the end they defeated not only the German invaders, but also the Croatian fascists, the Ustashe and others who had collaborated with the Nazis. The Ustashe had been given the administration of Croatia by the Nazis, and used it to hunt and kill Serbs.

In the immediate post-war period, the communist party exercised centralised control. The split with the Soviet Union in 1948 resulted in the isolation of Yugoslavia from the world communist movement. The country united behind Tito. The national question was buried even deeper. All feared that any internal conflict would open the way for outside military intervention.

Yugoslavia started to pursue

its own road to socialism. The central government decided to hand over enterprises to the ownership and management of employees – workers' self-management.

From then on, the trend was to ever more decentralisation – both in economic and political spheres. Within the government and the party, federal leadership structures were set up. But political opposition was not brooked.

All these measures failed to address the main underlying divisive tendency. The uneven pattern of wealth and production among the various regions could not be resolved within a decen-

tralised state.

The country was also suffering the ills of a market economy – high inflation, irregular growth, growing unemployment. The Croats and Serbs were often at odds – over disposal of foreign currency earnings, allocation of investment funds and also linguistic and cultural issues.

By the time Tito died in 1980, the unifying factors had all but evaporated. Despite the collective leadership plan, Tito left a gaping hole at the centre of the party and the state. All that was needed was for the cold war to end and economic recession to worsen living conditions. ♦

A personal view

from Dusan Stojnov in Belgrade, Yugoslavia

The war in Yugoslavia came as a surprise only to those unfamiliar with its short but peculiar history.

The falling apart of this dishonest federal relationship seems to be the easiest things in the world. And the situation would have been funny if it were not so tragic: Serbs are being accused of leading a secessionist policy in Croatia while Croats are being accused of leading a secessionist policy in broader Yugoslavia.

To complicate things further, Croats are accusing Serbians of being Bolshevik and communist.

And a bloody and cruel war it is. It is puzzling to watch one of its filthier sides: propaganda. The very same bodies presented on Serbian TV as victims of the Croatian slaughter-house are presented on Croatian TV as victims of the savage Serbs! The war is not only fought with bullets: the illuminating shells of words and pictures are sometimes even deadlier weapons. The first victim is the truth.

And the rumours: The Croatian paramilitary force has a skilled medical team with a big refrigerator truck which collects vital organs from fresh corpses for sale in Germany in exchange for weapons...

International forces say they wish to help. I believe them, at least if their help does not hurt. But weapons are being supplied galore. Rumour has it that some of the deadlier ones are from the Republic of South Africa.

It is commonly understood that war is an irrational decision. I doubt it very much. Going to war is as rational as going to cinema: here, it is a battle for the national identity of ethnic communities merged and fused in a melting pot which produced nothing but a poisoned stew. ♦