

The Balkans and Factors Leading to the Present Conflicts

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The beginning of the 20th century was marked by turbulence in the Balkans, so is the end. The bloody break-up of Yugoslavia in particular has caused people to wonder: what is it about the Balkans that makes them so unstable and, many would add, so different? The immediately observable difference of that region compared to, say Western Europe or North America, is that historically it has been "host" over a long period of time to two empires and is still host to three civilizations and religions.

The emergence of nation-states, after the fall of the empires, was, and still is an unsettling experience. The violent break-up of Yugoslavia should be viewed in that context, as the continuation of the creation of nation states. When viewed in that perspective, rather than the often posited, but quite wrong, perspective of age old ethnic hatreds, the Balkans appear no different from Western Europe which underwent the process of nation-state building in the 18-th and 19-th century. There too the process was often very violent indeed. The only real difference is that the Balkans are a century late in this historic development due to a host of circumstances, the most important being economic backwardness, inherited from the Ottoman Empire.

Another sweeping generalization which does not stand on closer scrutiny is that Yugoslavia was an artificial state and that, therefore, it had to break up. The "proof" is derived from the fact that it did, not allowing for other alternatives. The Yugoslav state experience was an experiment in self-determination. It was created not once, but *twice*, which does seem to suggest some basic, underlying rationale for its existence. The first state, created after the I World War was democratic, modelled after the then existing "incarnation" of France. But it was not *federal*. The second, Tito's Yugoslavia, was created after World War II. It was federal, but not *democratic*. The main weakness in both cases was that the central authority was insufficiently attentive to the differences in this difference-rich country.

Tito's Yugoslavia was generally regarded as stable. It had a high, internationally respected profile. The official slogan of "Brotherhood and Unity" of the peoples of Yugoslavia rested in part on the enormous political clout of Tito, in part on the authoritarian system but also in significant part on the acceptance of the population of a common destiny, common roots and a common state.

People married inter-ethnically, bought and sold property across ethnic lines, respected each other's religious and other differences. These are manifestations of communality which cannot be imposed by an authoritarian or repressive regime, but spring out of genuine feeling of shared values and a shared state.

When Tito died in 1980 he left a big void in the political reality of Yugoslavia. The leadership which inherited the agenda, and the problems, was incapable of meeting the challenge and the center of gravity called Yugoslavia was progressively weakened, while the power of leaderships in Yugoslav republics grew. Real career opportunities shifted from the center to the various republics and with it the logic of political action. No longer were the bonds and bridges at the top of the agenda, but differences and ravines. Ambitious republican leaders, Milosevic of Serbia first among them, tore at the remains of the integrative structures and emphasized the differences, adding, for good measure, that their respective ethnicities were treated unjustly in Yugoslavia. Claims of injustice were soon followed by accusations which in turn were followed by hatred, intolerance and finally war.

The recent wars in former Yugoslavia were a consequence of political ambitions and politics of intransigence. Ethnic differences were (ab)used in the process, swelling ethnic hatreds so that ethnic cleansing and ethnic engineering could be performed. "Why should I be a minority in your country when you can be a minority in mine?" was the philosophy of the day. Since ethnic groups, Serbs in particular, said "no" to being minorities elsewhere, and since the politics of intransigence prevented negotiated border changes, wars were fought *for borders and control of territory*.

The process is not finished. Bosnia is in a very unstable state despite the Dayton Peace Accord. The issue of Kosovo, a Serb held-territory with a 90% Albanian population, is a potential time-bomb. If the politics of intransigence and the abuse of ethnic nationalism continues, which is a definite possibility, we could see new outbreaks of widespread violence, even wars, in the Balkans again. To be sure, such a scenario is not inevitable but it is possible. Given the half-hearted measures of the US-led international community in securing peace in Bosnia, it is more than possible. It is probable.