

A Post-mortem

# The Demise of Yugoslavia

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The break-up and break-down of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a process that is still continuing, is one of the many calamitous events of the late twentieth century that saw an upsurge of neoliberal capitalism. This break-up was accompanied by processes of 'ethnic cleansing' brutal in the extreme. As the events surrounding this demise of a nation have been highly obfuscated in the western-dominated mass media—with the Serbs painted as the archetypal villains—it is important to fathom the actual primary villains in this macabre drama in the Balkans.

The events in Yugoslavia cannot be viewed in isolation from those in Eastern Europe in general after the collapse of the Soviet empire. They also have to be seen in the historical context of nation formation in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Looking at the nature of 'socialism' that was built up in Yugoslavia after its liberation from Nazi overlordship is also a necessary backdrop to understanding the post-1990 scenario. If one takes the tragic case of Yugoslavia as exemplary for the East European situation in general it will throw a great deal of light on the national question in Eastern Europe today. And it will tell us why the Chinese, for example, are haunted by the idea of the kind of intervention by the imperialist powers in Yugoslavia, which has ended in its destruction.

## THE CREATION OF YUGOSLAVIA

The national question in parts of Central and in Eastern Europe played itself out in a scenario of inter-imperialist rivalries. Caught between the powerful West European nation-states, especially Germany, and Tsarist Russia, the East European countries gained their independence and autonomy from within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, or from Tsarist Russia, via treaties between the imperialist powers towards the close of the nineteenth century and in the aftermath of the First World War. But the nature of independence that they gained as agricultural hinterlands of powerful neighbours was largely as dependencies to them. This fate continued to dog them throughout the twentieth century, with the US being added to the group of industrially advanced nations out to subjugate them and exploit their resources.

The idea of Yugoslavia (nation of South Slavs) arose in the nineteenth century as a response to the question of oppressed nationalities within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and of Christian nationalities within the Muslim Ottoman Empire. The idea of South Slav national identity was predicated more on language rather than exclusively on religion, and it united the culturally and

linguistically related groups of Catholic Croats, Catholic and Protestant Slovenes, Bosnian Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians. Russia, championing pan-slavism, attacked the Turks to drive them back from the Balkans, and in the aftermath of this, at the Congress of Berlin in 1877, the independence of Serbia and Romania and the autonomy of Bulgaria were recognised. Bosnia Herzegovina, coveted by Serbia as an outlet to the sea, was awarded to Austria as a protectorate, while Serbia itself functioned as its client state in the guise of independence. Subsequently, anti-Austrian forces came up in Serbia, which became a triggering point for the First World War.

The first Yugoslav state as also Czechoslovakia that came up at the end of the First World War were not exactly solely the result of decisions taken by the East European and South Slav ethnic groups involved. It was the allied powers, who winning the First World War, created these entities with primarily their own interests in mind. In their rivalry with Germany and Austria-Hungary—in the name of democracy and self-determination - in the case of Yugoslavia they awarded to Serbia, their war-time ally, the Hungarian territory of Vojvodina, the Albanian Kosovo and Macedonia. Parts of Croatia were handed over to Italy. In this artificially created entity with no appropriate and worthwhile economic development programme the ruling politicians of Serbia dominated over the territories under their control in an absolutely undemocratic way: they tried to impose a Serbian identity based on language and religion on the Catholic Slovenes and Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Bulgarian Macedonians. They expelled about 45,000 Albanians from Kosovo and settled 60,000 Serb colonists there.<sup>1</sup> Due to such chauvinistic policies, within the first 20 years of its existence, strong demands came up for autonomy, if not outright secession, primarily by the Croats. This internal ethnic tension and conflict could easily be utilised by politicians within as well as by external powers.

## HITLER AND STALIN

In the 1930s, Italy and Germany supported Croatian and Macedonian independence movements, including those groups and organisations using terroristic methods. In the context of Great Power rivalry in Europe, it is not surprising that Hitler's first major aggression was against Czechoslovakia that together with Yugoslavia had been created as a buffer state, in order to block German expansion towards the east and south and to dismember the Austrian Empire. Yugoslavia was initially an ally till 1941 when an anti-German government came to power in Belgrade. Then Yugoslavia too was attacked and dismembered by the Nazis.<sup>2</sup> As in other East European territories occupied by the Nazi forces, in Yugoslavia, too, there was a resistance and national liberation struggle led in the main by the local Communist Parties, but also supported by other democratic and patriotic forces. However, the nation-states that emerged in East Europe after these battles in 1945 were again far from being independent. This time they were drawn out of the West European orbit and were garnered together into the Soviet orbit by devious means and retained there often by the use of sheer force.

It may not be out of place to cite a few examples of the methods used by the Soviet Union under Stalin that served to disorient the partisan movements against the forces of Hitlerite fascism. First of all the somersaults in the Comintern position on the nature of the Second World War itself led to a lot of havoc and confusion among the resistance partisans not only in many dependent and colonial countries of the world, but also in an occupied country like France.<sup>3</sup> The Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, which the Soviet Union said it was forced to sign because of the reluctance of the Western powers to enter into an anti-Hitler alliance together with it, led to the unfortunate imposition on the Comintern and all associated parties of the line that the War was a purely imperialist affair and that it therefore made no sense to fight against the invading Nazis together with one's own bourgeoisie. In France, this was interpreted by leading Communist Party figures as "better Hitler than the Popular Front,"<sup>4</sup> and in Czechoslovakia Communist leaders heralded the invading German soldiers as proletarians in soldiers' uniforms and thus in no way class enemies to be combated. According to them, the real enemies were the Czech bourgeoisie and those of Britain and the US. However, once Hitler broke the Non-aggression Pact and attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the line was changed. Now it was said that though the War was an inter-imperialist one it was also simultaneously a 'war of liberation' and hence resistance to the Hitlerite forces was called for and supported by the Soviet Union.

Poland also became a victim of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. It was divided up between Germany and the Soviet Union, the latter claiming its eastern territories to have been part of the Byelorussian and Ukrainian republics. Similarly, the three Baltic republics were taken over by the Soviet Union within the terms of the 1939 Pact. They were occupied by the Germans in 1941 and then retaken by the Red Army and reincorporated into the Soviet Union in the post-Second World War period. In Czechoslovakia, in Poland and other East European countries those Communists who had actually fought in the underground Resistance during the War years were sidelined and replaced by pro-Soviet puppet leaders. The role played by the local resistances was played down and the role of the Soviet Union in the liberation was highlighted.

In Czechoslovakia one of the leading figures of the Resistance was accused of being an agent of the Gestapo and imprisoned. Any Communists with nationalist tendencies were viewed with suspicion by the Soviet leadership and treated accordingly. Many active Polish Communists fleeing to the Soviet Union in fear of persecution were there accused of imaginary crimes and executed.<sup>6</sup> The countries that came to be part of the Warsaw Pact and COMECON were held within their fold often literally by force of arms - as the events in 1956 in Hungary, and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia proved, when the Soviet Army, which already had a presence in other East European countries, invaded Czechoslovakia, too, when there was a danger of it slipping out of the Soviet orbit.

The Soviet Union wanted to retain these countries—these so-called People's Democracies—as provinces within the Empire ruled by edicts from the Centre relayed through their puppets in power. Their role was to produce in order to empower the Soviet Union militarily and economically and contribute to its status as a world superpower.<sup>7</sup> It had summarily dismissed the idea put forth in 1948 by Georgi Dimitroff, the Bulgarian Communist, of a Federation of Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> A federation of socialist republics that would include Yugoslavia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece was not acceptable to the Soviet leadership as it would be socialist but independent. In fact, the Soviet Union collaborated with the other Allies in keeping genuine Communist fighters from gaining power in these countries. Thus, in Greece, Stalin asked the Communist partisans to collaborate with the Allied Powers, and this finally culminated in civil war and the defeat of the Greek Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, till 1947, the Allies refused to sign peace treaties with Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, where partisan Communists shared power with other anti-fascist parties. These countries then turned to Russia for help and that was used by Stalin to liquidate those who had actually fought during the War and replace them through his henchmen in order to make these countries into Soviet satellites.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE YUGOSLAV BRAND OF SOCIALISM

Among the East European states Yugoslavia alone under Marshall Tito evaded direct Soviet domination. Under the garb of non-alignment and as a neutral buffer state between NATO and the Warsaw Pact it in fact used this position to become one of the biggest recipients of American economic and military aid. The Yugoslavia that was constituted post-Second World War comprised more or less the same territories and ethnic groups as in the post-First World War period with the difference that it was now a Federal Republic. There was considerable decentralisation of power to the individual republics, which had their own Communist Parties. As the economy was not aimed at being an essentially autarkic, self-reliant one, but open to the world economy, to foreign trade, aid and capital for its industrialisation, and due to its position as a buffer state between Germany and the Soviet Union, it received a lot of Western assistance. It became member of the IMF, World Bank and the West European trade blocs, the EFTA and EC, and by 1965, it also joined the GATT.

The Yugoslav brand of Communism was so-called 'market' socialism, the brand of socialism to be later adopted by China and finally even Soviet Russia. But what was not adopted by these countries was the Yugoslav model of workers' self-management. This was not actually meant to be a socialist institution; rather it allowed workers or labour to think in capitalist terms. Operational autonomy for the producers was combined with economic incentives (property rights and productivity-based incomes) for achieving rising productivity. Thus, the direct producers, the workers, participated in decisions about the allocation of net profit between wages and new investments (as an incentive to productivity and a long-time horizon on wage increases). These autonomous workplaces were actually

managed by directors formally elected by the workers' councils, which themselves tended to represent the labour aristocracy, the highly skilled workers. The actual aim of workers' self-management was to avoid raising employment (and thus the aggregate wage bill) above economic sustainability at the level of the firm, locality and country as a whole. Workers' self-management was practised only in state-owned firms and associations; besides this there was permitted a private sector to absorb labour in agriculture, small crafts and trade, which was kept small-scale to prevent true proletarianization.<sup>11</sup>

The local Communist parties tended to represent the interests of their republics. Economic regionalism came to dominate economic planning at the federal level. The wealthier regions tried to obtain the best economic position for themselves by capturing as many resources as possible for their economic development without undue concern for the widening gap with the poorer regions. Within the Federation uneven economic development took place among the different republics: Southern Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo and parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina remained agricultural even after 40 years of planned development. Slovenia and Croatia on the other hand were more industrialised and were hence richer and not willing to subsidise or share resources with the poorer republics.

The self-management system fixed people to their places of origin or work and blocked the growth of capital and labour markets across the union. The poorer regions ended up by exporting their unemployed 'surplus' labour abroad to the advanced industrial countries of the West and relying on foreign loans for internal consumption. The result was an indebted economy which by 1989 had registered an external debt of \$19 billion.<sup>12</sup> This increasing dependence on Western capital and Western markets meant that Yugoslavia became vulnerable to IMF-imposed policies of structural adjustment to resolve balance of payments and foreign debt crises. In this scenario, federal politics swung between a politics of economic redistribution among republican and local governments and one of competition for greater autonomy with regard to social property, that is, the disposition of revenues, profits and capital gains. This generated an insatiable demand for foreign credits as one way to keep the economy growing and ensure domestic peace. But ethnic conflict and strife could thus hardly be avoided in such a dependent and competitive economic scenario.

Structural adjustment meant structural changes that enabled greater exports to the Western markets to earn foreign exchange to service the debt. IMF stabilisation programmes meant a re-centralisation of monetary, trade, foreign exchange and incomes policies that in the 1970s had been handed over to the jurisdictions of the individual republics. These, however, still had control over industrial development. Components of the stabilisation programme, like devaluation and limits on wage increases, threatened the interests of highly industrialised republics like Slovenia and it was the first to put up a fight against the federal policies of the Centre. It was around this time in 1987 that Slobodan Milosevic captured the Serbian Communist Party machine and proceeded to build his power by appealing to historic rights and exclusive nationalism. He engineered coups within the Kosovo and Vojvodina parties and changed the

Constitution doing away with the autonomy of these two provinces. Twice without authorisation he used the reserves of the Central Bank to lessen the hardships on his electorate in Serbia.<sup>13</sup>

Ethno-nationalism came to the fore preceding and after the elections in 1990. Non-communist pro-independence parties were elected in all republics except Serbia, where Milosevic continued in power despite demonstrations against his regime and its failures on the fronts of democracy and economic progress. The richer republics sought a looser confederation with democracy, while Serbia insisted on a stronger centralised federal state without democracy at the federal level. The parties that won in Slovenia and Croatia combined national chauvinism with hostility to the largest local minorities. Ethnicity became a factor in the shrinking job market and this was a mode of excluding 'others' and the migrants from rural areas. Opposition to universal and uniform secondary education was also meant to close off well-paid white-collar administrative and managerial jobs to the children of workers and peasants.

#### WESTERN INTERVENTION

The break-up of Yugoslavia also took place in an international context when it ceased to be important as a buffer state to the US in view of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its stability and territorial integrity were no longer of strategic interest to the US and NATO. Hence they were not willing to loan the instalment necessary in the spring of 1991 to pay the interest on the Yugoslav foreign debt and keep economic reform on track. This was in contrast to the Western aid paid out at this time to countries in Central Europe—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and even Russia later on—in the bid to draw them closer into the Western orbit.<sup>14</sup>

Interesting is also the role played by reunited Germany, Austria and Italy in the break-up of Yugoslavia through their covert and overt support to the secessionist republics. In this they were supported by the other Western powers, who submitted to German pressure and strategic bargaining within the European Union.<sup>15</sup> The US too fell in line with German tactics as the dismemberment of Yugoslavia did not run counter to its own interests in the region. After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the Yugoslav Army was one of the largest 'independent' armies in Europe. Disintegration of the Yugoslav state meant disintegration of the Army. Bosnia had been the centre of Yugoslav defence strategy and had the heaviest concentration of military industries in the Federation. US and West European multinationals also had their eyes on deposits of coal and oil in Bosnia-Herzegovina and parts of Croatia. By giving recognition and aid to Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state the US and the EC curtailed the military and economic strength of Yugoslavia and also ensured open warfare in the region. This is because Serb minorities are there in Bosnia and in Croatia; Bosnian Muslims were initially Serbs prior to conversion, Macedonians were similarly Serbs according to the Milosevic regime and needed

to be reunited into a Serbian state, which implied realignment of existing borders and 'ethnic cleansing' to flush out the other ethnic groups.

Yugoslavia now stands broken up into a number of independent states: Slovenia, Croatia, the Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are being administered by the UN Security Council. Although formally still part of Serbia, Kosovo is likely to be granted independence as per negotiations that are currently going on. Montenegro will be holding a referendum on May 21 regarding whether it wants to remain within the confederation of Serbia and Montenegro. While Slovenia is already a member of the EU, Croatia is in accession negotiations, Macedonia is a candidate member and Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro are potential candidate states with clear prospects of future accession. There is some resistance within Serbia on the part of the workers of the state-owned enterprises to the programme of privatisation that is mandatory for such membership, but the ruling regime is under a lot of pressure in this regard.

This was the result of US and EU interventions in the region : thousands killed and millions becoming refugees within Yugoslavia or getting scattered within Western Europe. Within such a scenario of West European and North American machinations it was possible for authoritarian Serbian leaders to project themselves as victims, but in the absence of credible economic and political alternatives all the former Yugoslav nations have become dependent on the Euro-American alliance. The Balkan wars were then further used by this alliance to pursue its interests further in this region. The political and economic assistance offered to 'stabilise' the region is meant to make them further dependent on the West and incorporate them into the EU and thus enable the push further east of the European Union.<sup>16</sup>

The other East European countries, like Poland, Hungary and Romania, which had taken recourse to World Bank and IMF loans to keep their economies afloat in the 1980s also made a smooth transition to become neoliberal economies as desired by the western imperialists when the Soviet Union broke apart. The European Union along with the IMF and World Bank were instrumental in the 'reform' process, which entailed restructuring and privatisation of the industrial and financial sectors and of the social security systems.

Through these reforms a hub-and-spokes structure has been created in Europe with each state in the Eastern region relating to the others via its relationship with the western hub. Eastern Europe has become Western Europe's new periphery. Its economies are characterised by a high degree of penetration by foreign capital : finance, telecommunication, transport and manufacturing export sectors have been penetrated by West European and US capital. The lower labour costs make these countries preferred destinations for outsourced operations by Western corporations, which helps them in turn to enhance their profitability and competitiveness.<sup>17</sup>

The Balkans has thus become the eastern border of the Euro-American alliance, which has every intention of pushing ahead. Once again, as in the pre-First World War period, it has become a focal point of inter-imperialist rivalry. As a response to the stationing of NATO and EU peacekeeping forces here, the US plans to set up military bases in Bulgaria and Romania (candidate EU members) and to deploy anti-missile systems in Poland and other EU states, Russia has started a counter deployment of defence systems in Belarus.<sup>18</sup>

It is not just military means that are being used to subjugate nations. International law is also being used. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Court of Justice that were set up in The Hague under UN auspices were used to arraign Milosevic of crimes against humanity and genocide in Bosnia. The bigger villains who are involved, though in a different way, in the carnages in the Balkans and elsewhere are the ones preferring the charges. Might it seems is right. They remain judicially unchallenged as it is they who make the laws. This is a travesty of justice.

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