

Yugoslavia in the Twilight of the 20th Century

Leroy A. Binns Ph.D.

Abstract: *Herein lies an abbreviated chronicle of political disturbance in the former Yugoslavia particularly between the Serbs and Croats, Moslems and Serbs and Croats and Moslems along with insights into the ill-fated endeavors by Russia, the United States of America, the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to attain peace.*

Keywords: *ethnic conflicts, international intervention, fragmentation, political vulnerability*

1. INTRODUCTION

World War II exacerbated ethnic hatred in Yugoslavia. The occupation and division of the state by Nazi Germany facilitated Croat genocide and terror against the Serbs and Jews along with retaliatory behavior by the Serbian population. A multi-ethnic movement championed by Josef Tito officially materialized in 1945 following the creation of a new federation however such was conceived at the expense of Croats in Bosnia Herzegovina, the Serbs in Dalmatia, Banija and Baranja and Moslems in the Sandzak region.

2. THE FIASCO

In lieu of the Tito legacy an arrangement by Slovenia and Croatia to separately establish independence in mid June 1991 led to a new phase in Yugoslav history – the republic's succession from the Yugoslav federation. The quest for sovereignty although realized following ten days of fighting between Slovenian forces and the Yugoslav Peoples Army (JNA) when the latter withdrew and agreed to a cessation left in doubt a Croat solution. The Serbian minority was vehemently opposed to a Croatian government within the republic thus extending an invitation to the JNA and local Croat based Serbs to engage in battle. Yet like the Slovenians the Croats opted to wage a prolonged war amidst the odds – Serbian control of one-third of the territory, the killing of over 10,000 people, 30,000 casualties, dislocation of hundreds of thousands and the destruction of property.

Hostilities escalated largely due to a dissatisfied Serbian-Croat agreement – a product of JNA's failure in Slovenia. Further the acute war led to fragmentation within the JNA, a rift between Ante Markovic and the army's high command and the collapse of the federal government. The internal power struggle included Markovic's request for the resignation of Yugoslav Defense Minister Kadijevic, General Adzic's mistrust of senior officers and Markovic's departure following near death at the presidential palace (Cohen 1995).

As anarchy loomed the European community under the umbrella of the Brioni declaration sanctioned a Croat Stipe Mesic to assume the office of president of the redrawn federation but his incapacitation accountable to an inability gaining support from JNA, NATO and the European public sent mixed signals regarding a concise course of action and kindled opposing perspectives within the European community pertinent to the restructuring of the federation. Britain's foreign minister and the EC members were frightful of the continuation of a Balkans war and therefore sought a loose union while Germany adamantly supported the independence of Slovenia and Croatia.

Subsequent to mediation at The Hague in November 1991 the UN along with former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance concluded an accord that endorsed a peacekeeping force in Croatia. In the meantime the EC recognized the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. Nonetheless the restoration of peace was hijacked by cultural differences and political insecurities resulting in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian war (Copley 1992).

In an endeavor to pacify warring factions the Moslem leadership of the Moslem Bosniak Organization in late 1991 sought a Moslem/Serb accord to protect Bosnia – a remedy accepted by the Serbs but rejected by Ali Izetbegovic the Moslem leader of the Party of Democratic Action on the grounds of

ceding an advantage to the Bosnian Serbs in a dominant Moslem domain. Moreover Izetbegovic envisioned international recognition through the EC for Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state setting the stage for objection and rivalry. In a referendum to which the Moslems and Croats voted overwhelmingly for state autonomy Bosnian Serbs and neighboring supporters readied themselves for battle to achieve a semblance of statehood.

Fearing the worse in the former republics EC negotiators convened a conference in Lisbon to discuss the possibilities for peace. The conclusion; the reorganization of the republic into three territorial units outraged the Moslems due to the potential for ethnic divisions and led to the abandonment of the proposition. Another attempt was brokered by the EC in Sarajevo which in principle received unanimous support but faced complications in interpretation. Difficulties also arose from individual efforts to pursue solutions. Serbian leaders including Slobodan Milosevic initiated strategies to create a Serbian enclave in Bosnia which in response prompted the EC and the United States to recognize Bosnian independence (Cohen 1995).

The war that ensued demonstrated ethnic strife as the Serbs and the Croats retaliated against the Moslems. In May 1992 Serbian Radovan Karadzic of the Serbian Democratic Party and the Croatian Mate Boban the deputy leader of the local Croatian Democratic Party met in Graz, Austria to divide Bosnia between their respective groups but faced resistance from the US and the EC in the form of a trade embargo against Serbia for atrocities against the defenseless Moslems. In addition the international community initiated the Geneva Accords advancing a diluted central government and a regionalization of the republic into ten multi-ethnic provinces.

Despite the Croats enthusiasm concerning prospects of acquiring additional territory negotiations continued. The Serbs rejected the notion of returning property seized and the Moslems objected to the Serb's proposal of an alliance. Such controversy was once again apparent in March 1993 when a document was drafted to which the Moslems would only concur once given assurances of a ceasefire.

To erase stubbornness and ensure Serbian cooperation Washington voiced preference for the removal of the 1992 arms interdiction against the Moslems while also threatening NATO air strikes. Neither materialized since the Clinton administration failed to obtain approval from Serbian ally Russia and the European community. Instead Washington resorted to humanitarian effort and the UN sponsored Joint Action Plan to establish six safe areas around Sarajevo, Zepa, Srebrenica, Gorazde Tuzla and Bihac. The road to success likewise entailed a new strategy introduced by former British foreign secretary David Owen and Norwegian diplomat Thorvald Stoltenberg commonly known as the Owen-Stoltenberg plan. It emphasized the partition of Bosnia along ethnic lines. In sum the concept of self determination championed three republics with implied rights under international law.

Budding constructs nonetheless conflicted with staunch barriers of cultural orientation. Confronted with constant bombardment by the Serbian and Croatian forces the Bosnian government was reluctant to settle for an ineffective union that would limit their political presence in Bosnia. In addition anxieties were soon realized as the Serbs achieved control of Sarajevo provoking the US and NATO to caution air strikes on Serb artillery. The former in response deployed 300 troops in Macedonia in preparation for combat. Still disunity within the Pentagon and Western unwillingness to consider utilization of peacekeeping ground troops led to the resumption of bombing (Jelinek 1990).

Comradeship from Moslems in Islamic countries added to the problematic political equation. The rejuvenated Moslems mustered strength and captured turf assigned to the Bosnian Croats under the Vance-Owens proposal. Belligerence was likewise displayed by the Bosnian assembly's denunciation of the Owen-Stoltenberg initiative and the insistence of the return of land seized by the Serbs and the Croats.

During the final months of 1993 the allies made limited progress. The death of the aforementioned peace negotiation led to the introduction of the EU Action Plan facilitated by German and French cabinet minister Klaus Kinkel and Alain Juppe. The EU formula promised the lifting of sanctions against Serbia-Montenegro in return for land to the Moslems. As a consequence further discussions embraced the creation of altered boundaries, the notion of Croat-Moslem rapprochement and the plausibility of a Croat/Moslem republic (Lovric 1992; MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour 1993).

Early 1994 gave rise to more aggravating assaults. Croats annexed land in response to intense opposition from the Moslems whereas the Bosnian Serbs were assumed to be responsible for shelling

at a Sarajevo market that claimed the 68 lives and caused 200 casualties. In turn an outraged NATO expeditiously issued an ultimatum that endorsed air strikes as a corrective measure designed to rid the city of Serbian personnel and weaponry within ten days. However an imprudent declaration void of consultation with Russian authorities weakened her position and in the absence of a collective agreement prevented the deployment of Russian soldiers under UN auspices.

An impasse that bonded Croats and Moslems with the blessings of international participants via a ceasefire and the framework agreement was short lived. Discontent with a confederation between Bosnian Moslems and Croats aggravated a fragile atmosphere that bore elements of frustration as the Bosnian Serbs recaptured territory they lost to a recent Bosnian offensive. Most important was the furnace raging for Bihac accompanied by constant diplomacy by the EU to modify the focus.

The capture of Bihac a city supposedly protected by the UN and NATO added warranted reflection to a losing battle. The Western community's consideration of the Moslem plight was all but unanimous. Washington may have preferred a military option and the reversal of commercial restrictions but such actions would be accompanied with dire consequences – the immediate withdrawal of British and French personnel from the region.

A Republican Congress that categorized the EC as timid demanded of the White House unreserved management of the debacle to which the Clinton administration introduced a bilateral approach – shuttle diplomacy. Under the stewardship of US envoy Richard Holbroke the formulation as in the past envisioned a 49/50% split of territory but involved a different drawing of territorial boundaries. Nevertheless unsurprisingly akin to previous proposals it too was the subject of dissent. The Serbs protested on the premise of territorial loss that would exceed 20% while the Moslems questioned the official release of Srebrenica and Zepa to the enemy (The Economist 1994, 1995).

The brutal killing of 71 civilians in Tuzla and the capture of Srebrenica and Zepa compelled the West to act responsibly to the ongoing crisis. Much to the displeasure of the Russians NATO finally bombarded the Serbs. Approximately 200 planes from 12 countries raided Serbian military sites influencing the withdrawal of Serbian troops within 12 miles of Sarajevo and paved the way for meaningful discourse shortly thereafter. The aftermath was bargaining sessions in Dayton, Ohio officiated by international mediators and representatives of the feuding parties in which all consented to the Dayton Accords (Time 1995).

3. CONCLUSION

The maxim, “history repeats itself”, resonates with the Yugoslavian crisis. Most revealing is the dismemberment of the state between 1918 and 1941 and the post Tito revolution of 1991 that bears comparable traits in the form of value orientation and allegiance.

Despite years of communist rule (1945-1991) the Yugoslav federation faced the unsettled issue of animosity among its diverse ethnic and religious groups partly due to the leadership's inability to forge a national policy in support of unity. Thus with the demise of communism, ongoing ethnic division and the absence of resolve the state grudgingly acknowledged the challenge of disintegration.

Although the Republics of Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina ultimately endorsed the creation of new entities the division of spoils became a topic of contention. The Serbs sought protection for citizens outside the boundaries of Serbia-Herzegovina by imposing military might on Croatia. The latter also fought for similar privileges outside its jurisdiction in Bosnia while the outnumbered Moslems battled for mere existence.

As the war climaxed so did dominant personalities in favor of nationalism. In Belgrade Milosevic appealed for patriotic unity and ethnic loyalty from the Serbian population as did his counterpart Tudjman to Croats from his platform in Zagreb. Such manipulation and polarization nonetheless inflicted severe consequences upon the region. Budding egalitarian bureaucracies were overshadowed by opportunists whose exploitation of carnage inciting a rebirth of the past. Slaven Letica Tudjman's former advisor characterized this undemocratic phenomenon in Croatia

The culture or evil spirit of a single party system is again present in Croatia
It is the spirit of “conformism” which holds that any critical opinion has no
objective justification, that it is subjective fallacy, or even high treason
 (“opposition from within” and “enemies from without”). The new political

elite has inherited and extended the system of the abuse of power... the same people are being rotated from post to post, from one ministry to another, and there is no professional logic behind these shifts just like there was none in the old regime... The public is given no explanation as to why somebody is appointed to a post or removed from it.

By 1993 a hesitant international community interceded to broker a truce long elusive to local political operatives. In an effort to equate nationalism with democracy and economy prosperity the Vance-Owen and Owen-Stoltenberg initiatives were introduced. Diplomacy later included the Contact Group and US envoy Richard Holbroke but they too succumbed to failure on matters of relevance to territorial distribution.

Confronted by limitations attributed to the European Community, the UN and an imposed trade blockade and arms embargo a reluctant President Clinton sanctioned NATO, an international defense unit to bombard Serbian sites in retaliation to ceaseless aggression towards Albanians in Kosovo. Such achieved a desired outcome – the Dayton Accords but in light of further destruction critical scrutiny in the form of the following question; Were diplomatic means fully exhausted before a decision was made to bomb Serbia?

In a saga in which Milosevic's utmost intentions seem unknown, Tudjman's is ethnic cleansing and control of Eastern Slavonia and Izetegovic's survival the task ahead is daunting and unpredictable.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, Leonard. Broken Bonds: Yugoslavia's Disintegration and Balkans Politics in Transition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.
- Copley, Gregory. The Balkans Conflict: The Psychological Strategy Aspect. Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy. Vol 20, No 12, December 31, 1992
- Enter the Americans. The Economist, August 19, 1995
- Jelinek, Ya. Bosnia-Herzegovina at War: Relations between Moslem and Non-Moslem. Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Vol 5, No 3, 1990
- Lovric, Jelena. The Knife over Bosnia. Independent, August 3, 1992
- MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour. March 8, 1993, Transcript 4579
- No End in Sight. The Economist. June 17, 1995
- Russia: Heart Sick. Time. November 6, 1995.
- The Consequences of Bosnia. The Economist. December 3, 1994.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Leroy A. Binns Ph.D., is an International Relations specialist whose areas of concentration are East/West Relations and Caribbean & Latin American Affairs. He currently serves as an advisor within the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Studies at The Union Institute and is a lecturer within the Department of Government at the University of the West Indies, Mona. Dr Binns has authored numerous articles in refereed publications some of which include Social and Economic Studies, Caribbean Quarterly, Race, Gender and Class, The West Indian Medical Journal and International Journal of Educational Reform. His research endeavors presently includes a manuscript entitled "Fidel Castro Impacts International Relations in the Third World."