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# The Yugoslav Tragedy: Why Multicultural Societies Are Unlikely to Work

By Hermann Wagenbichler

Some 200 wars have been fought since the war that was supposed to end all wars (WWI). Throughout Europe, the current war in Yugoslavia has provoked more consternation and confusion than any war before it — not only because of its proximity, not only because it was preceded by a prolonged period of relative tranquillity and unprecedented affluence, but especially because of the unpredictable course of events and the archaic brutality displayed by all parties involved. What kind of war are we dealing with? It pitches Serbs against Croats, Orthodox Christians against Catholics and Muslims. Is it a civil war, a religious war, or simply a war of aggression? Or, is it a war of incompatible cultures fighting for survival in a region of limited resources, with no virgin land left for peaceful expansion? Questions abound. In a significant way, the war in Yugoslavia ought to draw our attention to problems facing the rest of Europe and the world at large.

In order to find some constructive answers to the many puzzling questions, we must plunge into the enlightening reservoir of history. We cannot hope to grasp the present or shape the future without intimate knowledge of the past.

## What Is a 'Nation'?

The war in Yugoslavia was initially perceived as a civil war. Fanaticism and brutality, well-remembered from the Spanish Civil War of 1936, are typical features of this kind of warfare. By definition, civil war is waged by factions of the *same* nation against each other. In this connection, it is important to appreciate two distinct conceptions of "nation."

In the Western Hemisphere (among the French and Anglo-Saxons), the term "nation" includes all citizens living within clearly defined territorial boundaries, irrespective of their ethnic origin and allegiance. The Central and East European concept of nation was formulated by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a German poet, critic and philosopher, and a close friend of Johann Goethe. In his scheme, primacy is assigned to the ethnic and historic cohesion of a people with little regard for more or less arbitrary, and ever shifting, territorial boundaries ("nations are images of God"). According to Herder, three criteria

define a nation: a common language, a distinct culture, and a shared history.

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Both interpretations of nationhood can be justified and each offers its own advantages. However, the Western concept of nation leads to great confusion if applied to multinational states, and it proves quite unworkable in areas of ethnic gerrymandering or enclaves — as in Bosnia. The multinational state of Yugoslavia never represented a cohesive nation. Only 8% of the population, according to several census tabulations, professed to be "Yugoslavs." These were mostly Serbs who perceived Yugoslavia as an extension of Greater Serbia. Tito (a Croat) made an effort to play down the importance of ethnicity and religion and tried to substitute communism as a basis for Yugoslav identity. He failed as badly as comrade Eric Honecker, who attempted to design a "Socialist German Nation" in East Germany. The civil war model, therefore, rests on shaky ground, although the excess of brutality certainly is reminiscent of the grim civil war pattern.

Nationalism, according to many left liberals, is to blame for many evils and most wars — but this judgment has grown out of a short memory. Nationalism evolved as a side effect of the French Revolution two short centuries ago. Were no wars fought before that? In the 17th century, Central Europe was ravaged by thirty years of religious wars. No one seriously suggested abolishing all religion in order to prevent future wars. Neither did the endless dynastic jousting of the dark Middle Ages lead to eternal peace after the decline and fall of the all-powerful monarchies.

The now-fashionable trend of making a convenient scapegoat out of nationalism may be a bit

premature. Perhaps the social biologists are right: with no other significant foe left on this earth, man turns more and more towards preying upon his fellow man.

Tempered nationalism is neither good nor evil. It bonds the individual to the social hierarchy at the national level. Too much of it (chauvinism) is just as bad as too little (libertarianism), or too much family loyalty (the mafia), too much race consciousness (racism), or promiscuous humanitarianism (dogoodism).

Efforts to selectively blot out the natural human attachment to one's nation will prove futile at best and outright counterproductive in the conflict at hand. Eastern European nations are strongly attached to their ethnic identities. Foreign domination by Russians, Turks and Germans has, for centuries, overshadowed their history. Only in the 1800s were they able to develop their own cultural elites.

## The Religious Crossroads

The gradual immigration of Slavic tribes into the Balkan region in the 6th and 7th centuries resulted in numerous readjustments of secular boundaries, but the religious spheres of influence remained unchanged. One part of the previously homogeneous Slavic people settled in the Byzantine-Orthodox Empire ruled from Constantinople. Their descendants are the Orthodox Serbs. Another part settled in the Catholic domain ruled from Rome. Their descendants are the Catholic Croats. For a while, both Serbs and Croats enjoyed the power and glory of national autonomy. It soon ended with Hungarian and Venetian domination over the Croats and a fateful defeat of the Serbs at the hands of the Turks in 1389.

In Bosnia, Orthodox and Catholics lived side by side with a heretical sect, the Bogomils. The latter, after suffering much persecution, converted to Islam. Their descendants are the Muslims of Bosnia. The Slovenians of Northern Yugoslavia, from the 7th century on, were dominated by German chiefs, kings and emperors. Characterized by their Slavic brethren as prudent, diligent and thrifty, they were propelled into autonomy after they got the short end of the deal in the royal Yugoslavia of 1918 and the communist Yugoslavia of 1945. As an independent nation within the framework of European economic cooperation, their future appears secure.

Are Serbs and Croats two distinct peoples or are they one people representing two different cultures? The answer from Serb and Croat would be the same: two peoples, two cultures — worlds apart from each other.

## Is Multiculturalism Possible?

Why does multiculturalism not work in Yugoslavia? The concept has rapidly gained the status of a buzz word in the West. Multiculturalism, whatever the term may imply (it's really an oxymoron), is supposed to resolve problems created

by the overlap of diverse and often incompatible value systems. Where in today's world can we find a truly multicultural society? On close scrutiny, the answer is: *nowhere*. The necessary prerequisites for such a society do not exist. To see why, let us examine two examples from the European past.

The Muslim, Christian and Jewish population of Moorish Spain (11th-17th centuries) was ruled by able and wise Arab caliphs. Religious tolerance was assured by the teachings of the Koran. Assimilation or conversion was neither required nor expected. This fortunate status of peaceful coexistence of three monotheistic religions resulted in a golden age. Science and the fine arts flourished with outstanding contributions from each culture. With the Christian *reconquista* (recapture) of Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella, all this came to a sudden end.

Let us take note of the conditions that made possible this example of a truly flourishing multicultural society: (1) undisputed authority in the hands of enlightened rulers, and (2) strict segregation along ideological lines. Neither Christian nor Jewish rule would have permitted this kind of "separate and equal" symbiosis.

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Let us examine another example from the past: Siebenbuergen. The central highland of Rumania was populated by Hungarians, Germans and Rumanians - all exposed to persistent threats of Turkish invasion. The Hungarians were of the Catholic or Calvinist persuasions, the Germans staunch Lutherans, the Rumanians Orthodox Christians. Ethnic and denominational borders were identical, assuring strict separation of each cultural group - a situation that could well be described as "apartheid." There was plenty of opportunity for each ethnic group to fully develop its own cultural potential. Again we find a combination of absolute, benevolent rulers (the Hapsburg emperors) and well-defined lines of separation among the ruled.

Quite clearly, these preconditions for a functioning multicultural society are incompatible with the ideals of a true democracy: one man - one vote, many votes equals a majority, and the majority rules. If every minority aspires to its own share of ruling, then, in the end, nobody rules. Disintegration and anarchy are inevitable. The structural framework has recently been torn from under a multicultural society in Greater Russia, and we are witnessing the

resulting disorder.

## The Balkans Since 1918

The multicultural experiment in Yugoslavia was doomed from the beginning. An artifact of the Versailles peace effort of 1919, it struggled against overwhelming odds. Its ideological foundations, namely Pan-Slavism and later communism, turned out to be delusions on a grandiose scale. A frail coalition of Serbs and Croats, joined mainly to fend off Italian claims for control of the Dalmatian coast, ended with Serbian domination of the kingdom of Yugoslavia. Then a Croatian delegate was murdered during a session of parliament. Frustration escalated into hatred and hostility.

Many Croats welcomed the advance of German troops during WWII and the subsequent establishment of a separate Croatian satellite state, including Bosnia and several Serbian enclaves. The brutalization of the Serbian minority found its counterpart in a murderous guerilla war of Serbs against Germans and Croats, claiming the lives of 1.5 million "Yugoslavs." The atrocities perpetrated by all combatants along the Balkan front exceeded by far the horrors of any other theater of war. And the killing did not stop with the end of WWII. Some 25,000 anti-communist Croatian and Slovenian refugees were turned over to Tito by British troops in Austria after the war was over. Their remains have recently been exhumed - only three persons survived this wholesale slaughter south of Ljubljana.

The new Yugoslavia of Tito was held together by his iron-fisted rule at home and by his skillful foreign policy, playing East against West. His death in 1980 inevitably led to a resurgence of deeply rooted ethnic and religious animosities.

## Consequences of Mass Migration

Another aspect of the Yugoslav tragedy deserves attention. It is the worldwide problem of refugees and asylum seekers. Well-meaning human rights groups, vocal liberals, and an increasing number of church spokesmen are pleading for the indiscriminate and unconditional admission of political as well as economic refugees. In Germany and in Austria, any effort to bring into the debate rational considerations beyond the immediate plight of the victims instantly provokes charges of "racism," "right radicalism," and "neo-Nazism." The clamor should not distract our attention from the long-range consequences of ill-conceived policies.

The current territorial aggression of the Serbs was set in motion by widely spread Serbian enclaves beyond the borders of Serbia and Montenegro. A devastating defeat and subsequent occupation of Serbia by the Turks in 1389 led to a persistent flow of refugees into Croatia and Hungary. Whole villages took up their church banners and, led by their priests,

escaped into the neighboring domain of the Hapsburg Empire. They were granted asylum and were resettled along the fortified southeastern defense perimeter of the empire. They were given special privileges in exchange for their willingness to defend their new homeland against the common enemy, the Turkish menace. Gradually the one-time refugees began to outnumber the natives in some areas of Croatia and Bosnia. With the breakup of Yugoslavia came the urge to reunite with Serbia proper. The victims of Turkish aggression had evolved into the Serbian aggressors of today.

What does the future hold for the victims of Serbian aggression? That is a question to ponder!

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The exodus of many Serbs from the Ottoman Empire triggered another shift of ethnic borders in the Balkan jigsaw puzzle. The Albanians, original inhabitants of a coastal strip south of Croatia, expanded into the deserted Serbian province of Kosovo, where they now make up 90 percent of the population. Tito, as a Croat, had granted them considerable autonomy within the communist framework of Yugoslavia. His Serbian successor, Milosevic, revoked autonomy and imposed draconian police measures in an effort to suppress open revolt by the Albanian majority. Another time bomb is ticking away next to Bosnia. The coming explosion can be expected to exceed the terrors of current events in Bosnia.

## Conclusion

How will it all end? Are the Serbs going to get away with their reckless pursuit of a Greater Serbia? Is the mass rape of Muslim women and the brutal "ethnic cleansing" to remain just another episode in the bloody annals of war? The rape of some 250,000 German women by the Russian *soldateska* at the end of WWII, encouraged by the notorious appeals of Ilja Ehrenburg, went unpunished. In the most sweeping ethnic cleansing operation of recent times, 14.5 million Germans were driven from their homes in East Prussia, Pomerania, East Brandenburg, Silesia, the Sudetenland, and Eastern Europe in 1945. More than two million innocent civilians perished in the process. Fifty years later, we at least profess outrage over such atrocious behavior. Stopping it is another matter.

The ultimate outcome of the murderous conflict in former Yugoslavia is hard to predict. A few sobering conclusions, however, can be drawn from the relentless course of events:

- The era of multinational states seems to have run its course, in Yugoslavia and elsewhere. In any such arrangement, small ethnic groups are politically handicapped and large ones find ruling by democratic principles a strain beyond their capacity. Efforts to transform Europe into one multinational conglomerate should be viewed with skepticism.

- The future feasibility, if any, of multicultural societies, will depend on the degree to which forces of amalgamation and cohesion outweigh those of diversity and chauvinism. The political rhetoric of the day in the United States seems to encourage the latter, and bodes ill for its future.

- The uninhibited migration over the next few decades of millions of potential political and economic refugees poses a serious threat to all existing cultures and to civilization at large.

- Democracy, the preferred model of political organization, seems to work best on a limited scale, and in countries with a reasonably homogeneous population. DeGaulle's idea of a confederation of autonomous national states — a Europe of cooperating fatherlands — appears preferable to the feverish pursuit of a utopian, multicultural Mega-Europe, taking its place in a larger New World Order.

With these thoughts in mind, it seems prudent to keep our attention focused on the prevention of Yugoslav-type tragedies in the rest of the world, rather than rushing into an ill-conceived salvage operation in the Balkans. ■