

Slovenia pays the price of economic renaissance

THE Slovenes are late-comers to a struggle for an independent state. Tucked into a tranquil and lush corner of the Alps, the two million Slovenes are not burdened with a martial tradition or memories of past glory.

A blurred memory still endures of an independent Slovene duchy, which vanished into the mist in the ninth century. Since then, the Slovenes have pragmatically accustomed themselves to foreign rule.

After six centuries in the Habsburg empire, they passed without undue exhilaration or distress in 1918 into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later called Yugoslavia.

Unlike their Catholic neighbours in Croatia, who struggled bitterly between 1918 and 1939 with their royal Serb masters, the Slovenes put destructive dreams of independence to one side in favour of the more lucrative, if more prosaic, struggle for self-enrichment.

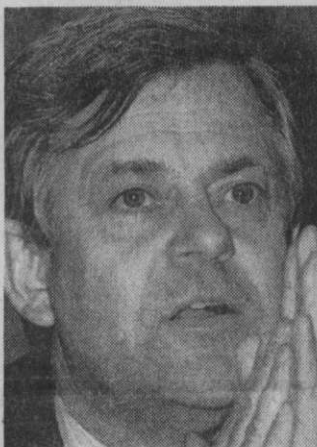
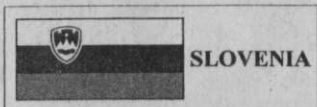
The mass of Slovenes rallied loyally to the Yugoslav cause when war broke out in 1941, though some followed the royalists and others the Partisans, led by Josip Broz Tito.

The victorious Tito was himself of mixed Slovene-Croat descent and the post-war Slovene Communist leaders accommodated themselves to the state with the familiar mixture of pragmatism and enlightened self-interest as their predecessors.

But by the 1980s, Slovenia was rapidly sloughing off Communist rule and was plunging into a cultural and economic renaissance. The speed of change began to place a serious strain on the republic's relationship with the rest of Yugoslavia.

To the horror of the Serbian Communists in Belgrade and their military allies, it seemed as if an alliance of pacifists, punks, Catholics, gays, greens and nationalists were being allowed to trample unchallenged over the sacred truths of Communist rule. The savage mockery of the Serb-dominated army in the pages of the radical magazine *Mladina* was particularly galling.

Appeals to Slovenia's new Communist leader, Milan Kucan, to crush this "counter revolution", as it was called in Serbia, fell on deaf ears. The canny Mr Kucan realised Communist rule in Europe was doomed and decided to champion the very forces which he was supposed to stop. He survived the transition in 1990 from Communist rule to a multi-party democracy quite unscathed, merging deftly into the role of non-party elder statesman when he was elected president of Slovenia in April 1990.



Milan Kucan

But the rise in Serbia of a xenophobic hardline Communist clique led by Slobodan Milosevic closed this path off and challenged the Slovenes. Mr Milosevic was determined to overthrow the post-war dominance in Yugoslavia of the northern republics of Slovenia and Croatia and restore Serbian power.

Slovene entreaties for the rapid integration of Yugoslavia with Europe, for the curtailing of military influence and a quicker transition to a market economy, fell on deaf, indeed hostile, ears.

As recently as a few weeks ago, very few people in Slovenia regarded the forthcoming "declaration of independence" from Yugoslavia as much more than a political gesture, designed to break the log-jam between the pro-Western republics of Croatia and Slovenia and their opponents in Serbia.

The ascendancy in the army of a very hardline faction of Serbian Communists, who appeared determined on war to retain the order and privileges with which they are familiar, forced the Slovenes to make a tough choice. On the one hand, they could return to a centralised, Serb-dominated state, burdened with a parasitical military machine and condemned to permanent isolation from the rest of Europe. The other choice is to fight.

The first choice means surrendering all the precious gains of the last 45 years but the second choice means taking an unfamiliar path. It is tragic but also richly ironic — a nation with no martial tradition and not much of a reputation for nationalism is now fighting perhaps the last war for independence in Europe.

Marcus Tanner