

# Behind the ethnic rivalry

Slovene democrats and Serbian communists in the Yugoslav conflict

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Prior to its war with the Yugoslav federal army, few people in western Europe knew the exact geographical location of Slovenia, let alone had any knowledge of its history. So it is unsurprising that a succession of clichés have been substituted for understanding: annoyance with a small nation for disturbing the peace of the European *status quo* has been followed by sympathy for the victim of aggression. Little thought is involved in either attitude. On the one hand, there is the unthinking belief, rooted in a vulgarly understood *ragione di stato*, that insists that the preservation of a single Yugoslav state is justifiable. This fixation on the belief that an existing state has reasons for its action simply because it exists makes it impossible even to raise the question of whether there are reasons for a new state to come into existence. The "reason of state" is reduced to un-reason when it means that those who have no state cannot possibly have reason themselves. The sympathy of some good souls for the weaker party, on the other hand, and a condemnation of the use of violence as a means of resolving differences does not amount to real reflection on the present situation and its causes. So far there has been little interest in asking questions such as: why did the war have to happen? Was it simply the means used by the mighty that were unjust, or their political objectives as well? And do the victims of the injustice have any arguments on their side?

At the root of the Yugoslav crisis there is a conflict between two incompatible political systems. The prospect of a democratic, open society was (some ten years ago) first formulated in, and most persistently followed by, Slovenia. For long years there was little or no support for these developments in other parts of Yugoslavia. The slowly decaying federal structures of the communist dictatorship, the militant Serbian communist authorities, and the Yugoslav army, were powerful and uncompromising defenders of the old regime. For often incomprehensible reasons, these forces enjoyed the support of Western (not to mention the Brezhnevite Eastern) governments. The conflict was aggravated by the fact that both parties were successful in their politics. Slovenia has gone through a transformation and founded a democratic system, yet its efforts to effect democratic reform in the common Yugoslav state failed completely. The Belgrade-based Holy Alliance effectively and systematically blocked all initiatives to reform and modernize the country as a whole, yet failed to stifle democratic changes in Slovenia, to prevent the fall of communism in Croatia or to subdue Bosnia and Macedonia. When there was no way left to formulate the terms of political cohabitation in Yugoslavia, Slovenia decided to declare independence, and Belgrade to fight a war, for brute force was and is its sole argument.

No one involved at the start of the process of democratization imagined that the end result might be independence. The independent State of Slovenia was not an issue. The issue was an independent society within Slovenia. Independence meant independence from the state. The catchword was "civil society": social spheres different and distinct from, and opposed to the sphere of state action, had to be created and asserted. It is true that there was debate in the 1980s on whether a state dominated – or rather devoured – by the Party could be conceived of as a state properly speaking. Those who answered "no" argued that a proper state had to be created: a state ruled by law, accountable to and controlled by society.

The distinctive feature of democratization in Slovenia was that it was initiated by the new social movements. It was the post-1968 generation that was instrumental in the formative phase. Reform communists, revisionist marxists and dissenting intellectuals of other convictions took little part; as did the ageing New Left which found it difficult to cope with the "consciousness of defeat". That consciousness was created by the late President Tito's successful suppression of the liberalization of the 1960s or the Yugoslav "cultural revolution", as it was called. It was the youth subcultures, particularly punk, that created the first major breach in the system, in the late 1970s.

The communist authorities in Slovenia tried to eliminate punk and related subcultures by police repression, yet failed. The state could not produce

any ideological justification for repression and finally had to retreat. What followed was an explosion of independent social activities. Anti-militarists, pacifists, feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, those searching for new spiritual experiences, younger intellectuals excommunicated from the official production of knowledge, appeared in public and formed a network which called itself "the Alternative Scene". They articulated a new political language and social imagery. Writers, sociologists and philosophers of the older generation, unhappy with the system in which they were more or less established figures, gradually began to be involved in what was later to become opposition politics.

In the mid-1980s, the Slovene authorities had to recognize the new "historical situation" and decided to accommodate it. This became possible after the League of Communists of Slovenia succeeded in retiring the "old guard", Tito's "soldiers of the revolution". Under the leadership of Milan Kučan, now President of Slovenia, the Party transformed itself into a party with a programme somewhere between German social democracy and Italian communism. It conceded a de-monopolization of power, and finally agreed to free elections. Thus quite unnoticed by the rest of the world, Slovenia entered the post-communist era with communists still in power, somewhat earlier than the spectacular "revolutions" in East Central Europe.

No real conflict existed between Belgrade and Ljubljana as long as the communists in Slovenia ruled firmly. On the contrary, Yugoslav communists acted with "brotherhood and unity" in repressing opponents of the regime, wherever they happened to emerge. Things changed, however, once the emerging democratic civil society began to mount an effective challenge. It was not the unwillingness of Slovene authorities to suppress the "Alternative Scene" (they did make an attempt, noisily supported by the Serbian and Croatian media), but their lack of success that alarmed comrades in Belgrade. This was a worrying sign.

In the early 1980s, socialist ideology in Yugoslavia found itself in the process of rapid dissolution. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia had not only failed to avert this decline in the ideology of the ruling elite, but had itself begun to fall apart. It was in order to prevent such alarming developments that the hard core of the communist regime, the repressive apparatus, took over the defence of socialist ideals. It rightly perceived ideology as the cement of "socialist order".

The task was initially entrusted to the federal public prosecutor. After his failure, the Yugoslav army took ideological affairs into its own hands. Its political department and counter-intelligence service, KOS, became Yugoslavia's Grand Ideologist. The advantages of a military recomposition of ideology were obvious: this was an armed ideology. If it failed to "grasp the masses" and to "become a material force", the army was at hand, ready to intervene as a "material force" itself and help the ideology become reality.

If the failure of the Slovene Party to repress the "Alternative Scene" aroused suspicions about the "health" of communism in Slovenia, its sliding "reformism" confirmed the army's worst fears. They now felt intervention was justified. In fact, the army might have reconciled itself to the decline of communism were it not for political developments in Serbia. Here, in contrast to Slovenia, communism was rejuvenated in the second half of the 1980s. With Milošević, the Serbian communists acquired an able leader who succeeded in gaining new legitimacy for the Party. Having first achieved a degree of control over the media that even Goebbels would have envied, he was able to mobilize a mass popular movement in his support. This movement was a Janus-like creature. One face was the "antibureaucratic revolution". This was the Serbian Party-State mob which by 1989 had overthrown the corrupt leaderships of the province of Vojvodina and the republic of Montenegro and replaced them with new ones who were no less corrupt but much more devoted to Milošević. The movement's other face was nationalist. Milošević's great success was to revitalize communism by

giving it a new agenda: the incorporation into the Serbian state of all the territory claimed to be part of the historical dominion of Greater Serbia. The main struggle was over the province of Kosovo. This resulted in the removal of that province's autonomy and, through the imposition of Serbian rule, the blatant violation of the basic rights and liberties of the majority Albanian population. In this manner, Serbia came to control four votes out of eight in the federal Presidency. Thus it has been able to block any reform which might either endanger communist rule in its sphere of influence or undermine the federal structure, inherited from the communist dictatorship, that represents the level of Serbian domination over the rest of Yugoslavia.

Given the reconstitution of the communist regime in Serbia and the decision made by the Slovene political leadership to follow its society on the road out of communism, it is not surprising that the ways of these two republics parted. The Yugoslav army's approval of the former and disapproval of the later added impetus. Until recently, the Slovene leadership still hoped to persuade the power-holders in Belgrade to reform the common Yugoslav state and suggested a "looser federation" (or "confederation") as a possible solution. In response, the forces of the *ancien régime* escalated their attacks on Slovenia. Counter-revolutionary Slovenia was now accused of "nationalist deviation". The crucial point to understand is that the explanation of the Yugoslav conflict in terms of ethnicity and nationalism was imposed by Belgrade in order to obscure the real causes of the conflict. The charge itself, of course, generated nationalism and ethnic hatred. It became obvious that the Yugoslav federation was approaching its end.

The independent society developing in Slovenia was actually characterized by an absence of nationalism, and a cosmopolitan culture. However, the unceasing accusations that democratization equalled nationalism, and that any challenge to the undemocratic federal structures meant the destruction of Yugoslavia, began to provoke a response in kind. Two events were of decisive importance. The first was the show military trial in Ljubljana, in 1988. The charge involved the betrayal of military secrets by an officer in the federal army to Slovene journalists. It was later revealed that the secrets were details of unconstitutional actions that the army planned to take regarding Slovenia. The case abounded in illegal and anti-constitutional practices, and was clearly intended to provoke and affront the local population. The reaction was a nationwide mobilization of Slovene society.

The other event was the hunger strike of Albanian miners in Kosovo, early in 1989, in protest against the Serbian suspension of the autonomy of the province. A solidarity meeting was organized in Ljubljana in support of the miners, and as an attempt to save their lives. This was the first political action in Slovenia in which both official and opposition organizations took part. The Serbian leadership was infuriated and called "the people" on to the streets. A "Serbian occupation" of Slovenia was seen as a real possibility. This time, the ruling and not-yet-ruling political forces existing in Slovenia united to create a form of crisis management. This was the Slovene version of "round table" talks and resulted, after the threat from Serbia had diminished, in an agreement to organize free elections.

The elections brought an end to unity and a highly diversified political society emerged. They also represented a multiple break: not only with the communist system but with the politics of democratization. A key aspect of the break was the shift of emphasis from independent society to independent state. Secession became a cornerstone of the electoral propaganda of the anti-communist coalition, Demos, which won the elections. Once in power, the coalition felt obliged to pursue the politics of Slovene state sovereignty. This became the axis of its legitimacy, and in order to achieve the aim Demos called for the unity of the nation. Its own political practices became increasingly monopolistic. Demos's argument was that it was the unmediated embodiment of the general, that is, national interest.

Cross-cutting the political spectrum, however, was a recognition that, without reform in Belgrade, an independent state was a necessary condition and guarantee for successful democratization in Slovenia. While rejecting nationalism and the other undemocratic features prevailing in Demos, the opposition shared the vision of an independent state. In this respect, opposing political programmes have met. This has strengthened the ruling coalition, but the different understandings of this common goal have planted seeds of diversity in the unity of Slovene politics. The ideal of the independent state contains an inherent tension between nationalism and democracy, and thus the political future of Slovenia remains open. Paradoxically, it has been the denial, not the recognition of a nation-state which has strengthened nationalism.

It is likely that repeated declarations of sovereignty did little to increase harmony between Ljubljana and Belgrade. It is difficult to say what difference restraint and continuing attempts to negotiate a confederal structure would have made, given the West's tacit collusion with a repressive federal power and its insistence on Yugoslav unity at any cost. Whatever the wisdom of Demos's politics of secession, by responding with tanks and bombing raids, the Yugoslav federal army has succeeded in converting what was predominantly gesture politics into concrete incontrovertible fact. Few Slovenes would consider paying taxes for or serving in an army that threatened them with chemical weapons. And the propaganda war currently being waged in each republic's media reveals a legacy of mistrust and enmity that may take a generation to heal.

The key question therefore is not how to restore the *status quo ante*, for there is no way back, but how to ensure that any necessary transformation of the existing order occurs in as just and peaceful a manner as possible. Many fears have been expressed: that it is selfishness on the part of Slovenia to abandon the less prosperous, more troubled republics to their fate; that this is the beginning of a process of endless destabilizing fragmentation; and that in an increasingly complex and interdependent world the idea of the nation state is a nineteenth-century anachronism. With the advent of a federal Europe likely, Slovenia's rejection of "federalism" seems particularly obtuse.

The charge of selfishness is a curious one, given that it is part of *Realpolitik* for nations to act in their own best interest. More significantly, it is arguable that an independent Slovenia can exert far more leverage over, for example, human rights in Kosovo, if it has an independent voice rather than being spoken for by an unrepresentative federal government. Protests from within the system did little to improve the lot of the Albanians and only increased Serbia's hostility to Slovenia. Nor is it clear that the recognition of Slovenia means *eo ipso* recognition of Croatia. Given the fact that Croatia, unlike Slovenia, made no legislative changes prior to its declaration and that Croats hold a number of key positions in the federal government, it could be argued that Croatia's declaration was more in the nature of a bargaining position from which to negotiate a new relationship with Serbia. Without continuing European mediation, such negotiations are likely to be accompanied by a high toll in human life. There is no single and immediate answer to all of Yugoslavia's problems. Tension could perhaps be reduced by solving what can be solved and allowing Slovenia to depart.

The world is indeed becoming more complex and interdependent. Yet the creation of new independent states, whether in the Baltics or Balkans, or even, dare one say it, in Britain itself, need not reduce the prospects for European integration. On the contrary, it could increase them. It is the smaller nations who, far from quarrelling fractiously among themselves, are pushing for a new vision of Europe, in which the rights of all its citizens (including those of minorities) are legally guaranteed and respected, where power is devolved to the smallest unit and co-operation is enhanced at every level. This is decentralization rather than fragmentation. And it is the old "empire's", balking at the loss of their "central" authority, that threaten stability. If national frontiers are ever going to wither away it will not be through the imposition of unified states on unwilling peoples, but through allowing, as a first step, those old artificial bonds to dissolve. Once people feel that they can live and express themselves in the way they want, they may perceive that this way is not so different from that of their neighbours.

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