

The Dissolution of Yugoslavia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whereas the violent breakup of Yugoslavia was not inevitable, it collapsed and descended into war for a number of reasons, among them, the political illegitimacy of Communism and the decline in living standards common to command economies, systemic structural flaws (most notably the federal system), the failure of its people to develop a common historical narrative, and the role played by Slobodan Milosevic and other ambitious political leaders and intellectuals in several of the republics.

Perhaps the most important of these factors was the lack of system legitimacy, since illegitimate systems are much more vulnerable to collapse than legitimate systems and are harder hit by economic crises. When one adds to this the fact that the sundry people making up Yugoslavia had entirely different understandings of the past, it is easy to see why they had difficulty in finding a consensus about the best remedies. Moreover, for a multiethnic state to be stable over the long term, it is necessary that the historical narratives of the constituent peoples be purged of mutual resentment, mutual recrimination, and mutual blame so that the constituent peoples do not subscribe to narratives in which they define each other as ‘the Enemy’.

- The historical narrative embraced by most Serbs emphasized both their suffering at the hands of others and their sacrifices in sustaining the dream of a united Yugoslavia. In 1985 members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) set about drawing up a Memorandum in which they articulated a pervasive resentment over a federal system which, they claimed, had deprived Serbs of their rights, especially those living in other republics and the autonomous province of Kosovo. By 1989, apprehension over the fate of Kosovo’s Serb minority had fueled a resurgence of nationalism which Slobodan Milosevic exploited to consolidate political power at the expense of the Titoist formula of “brotherhood and unity”.
- The dominant Croatian historical narrative identifies them as a distinctly central European people who had been unfairly subordinated to others, since 1918 by the Balkan Serbs and after 1945 by a Communist regime directed from Belgrade.
- Albanians insist that they were present in Kosovo long before the arrival of the Serbs, whom they accuse of systematic discrimination and repression after the province’s incorporation into Serbia in 1913.
- By the late 1980s the Slovenian historical narrative had shed any recognition of the positive consequences of Slovenia’s association with Yugoslavia, which Slovenes increasingly judged to be no longer in their national interest.
- Beginning in the 1990s, the Bosniak historical narrative stressed the negative impact of Belgrade’s policies on Bosnia’s Muslims during the interwar period and the violence committed by Serbian Chetniks during World War II.
- The dominant narratives, as measured by history textbooks used in the schools and by the versions of history spelled out by academics, differ in their accounts of the formation of Yugoslavia, the nature of the interwar Kingdom, the number of casualties during World War Two, the role of such historical personalities as Stjepan Radic, Nikola Pasic, Draza Mihailovic, Alojzije Stepinac, and Josip Broz Tito, and the experience of communism.

Although there existed parallel cosmopolitan narratives that valued the achievements and benefits of multiethnic Yugoslavia, they remained a minority view which was overwhelmed by

nationalist discourse during the slide toward dissolution. But neither these national historical narratives nor the (perceived) injustices they recounted ‘caused’ Yugoslavia’s collapse. Rather, it contributed to the maintenance of inter-group boundaries, distrust, and resentment that would enable an ambitious politician to mobilize his own group against others. Indeed, it required human agency and a conscious strategy – and money -- to take a people who had been neighbors, in-laws, friends, and comrades and lead them into a fratricidal war. It was Slobodan Milosevic who exploited economic and other problems by leading a “national revitalization” movement within Serbia which sought political and territorial objectives incompatible with the interests of other republics and national groups.

By 1990, Yugoslavia’s breakup could have been averted only by a common effort by domestic political leaders and, aided perhaps by the timely assistance of the international community. Instead, the ambition of political leaders and intellectuals in several republics, abetted or opposed Milosevic’s agenda at the expense of Yugoslav unity. Although the international community could have been more proactive in its attempts to save Yugoslavia, neither the United States, nor Germany, nor any other foreign power materially affected the course of dissolution.

Nonetheless, a number of a number of narratives have emerged since the breakup – principally within Serbia -- which blame Yugoslavia’s dissolution on a conspiracy fomented by a self-seeking national group (such as the Slovenes or Muslim fundamentalists) or foreign power (most notably the United States, Germany, and the Vatican) for Yugoslavia’s demise. The team finds no credible evidence to support these claims.