

YUGOSLAVIA

THE
CASE

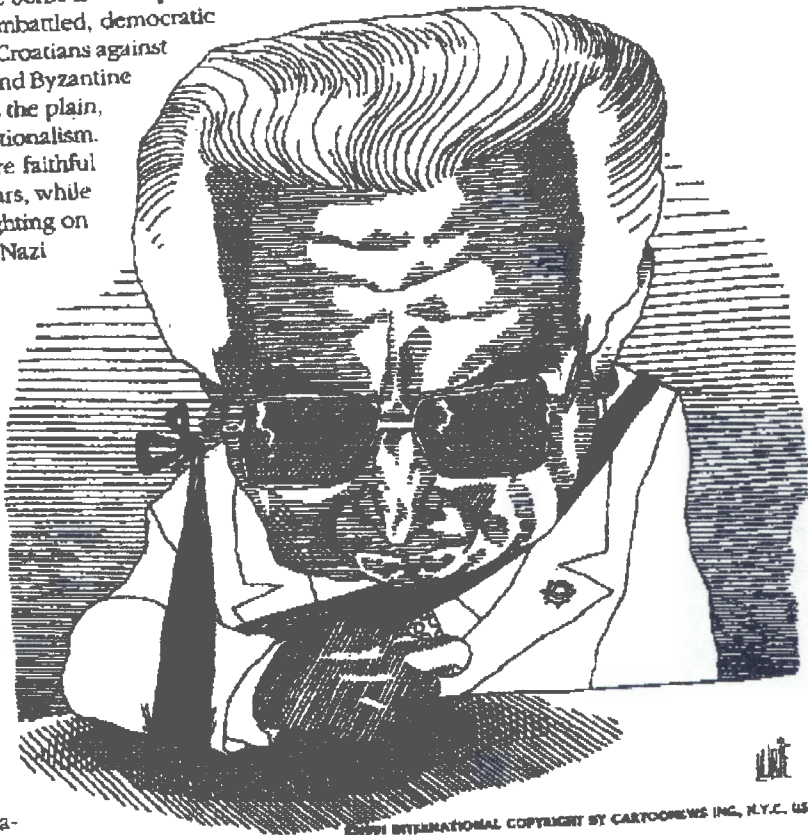
Stephen Sestanovich's article "The Diplomatic Mistake That Made Yugoslavia" (*July Journal*, pp. 11-12) offers a comprehensive picture of the messy Yugoslav situation, a thankless job, to say the least. Unfortunately, the article fails to explain why Yugoslavia's first incarnation, established in 1918 as the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, was such a failure after only 23 years. Instead, the story revolves around the bullying Serbs on the one hand and the poor, suffering Croats and other Yugoslav ethnic groups on the other. But the problem is not so simple.

Sestanovich adopts a somewhat cavalier approach to the entire Yugoslav problem. Without saying so outright, he paints the Serbs as somehow "different" and unwilling to trust the Croats. Nothing is said about Croats who sold out to Nazi Germany, helped destroy Yugoslavia, and caused untold suffering to the Serbian minority of about 2 million living in Croatia at the time. The Serbo-Croat problem, though difficult for outsiders to understand, is directly responsible for the current Yugoslav debacle.

Plain old nationalism

The conflict between the Croats and the Serbs is often presented as a confrontation between the struggling, embattled, democratic forces of freedom-loving and pro-Western Croats against the Communist, totalitarian, imperialistic, and Byzantine Serbs. It is nothing of the sort. Instead, it is the plain, old struggle known in history as Balkan nationalism. Few people remember that the Serbs were faithful allies of the United States in two World Wars, while the "Western-oriented" Croats were fighting on the side either of Austria-Hungary or Nazi Germany. The Nazi puppet, the Independent State of Croatia, even found it necessary to declare war on the United States, a declaration that was never repealed.

The Serbs and the Croats lived for centuries in Austria-Hungary, side by side and intermingled. As early as the middle of the 15th century, Serbian freedom fighters and their families were driven into the Military Region (Vojna Krajina), or Krajina, as it is now known, before the onslaught of the superior Turkish forces following the fall of Bosnia. The Hapsburgs encouraged both Serbs and Croats to settle in this border region in an effort to establish a zone of defense against the Turks. As they had done elsewhere, the Hapsburgs manipulated the Catholic Croats against the Eastern Orthodox Serbs.



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Croatian President FRANJO TUĐMAN

FOR THE SERBS



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Serbian President **SLOBODAN MILOŠEVIĆ**

The rivalry between the two grew rapidly and at times became bitter and hostile. In the 19th century, Croatian philosopher and politician Ante Starcevic, known for his radical views, denied the very existence of the Serbian people. In two of his many pamphlets, entitled "The Name Serb" and "The Slavo-Serbian Breed in Croatia," Starcevic described Serbs as "Gypsies" and "Albanians" (then, as now, considered insulting terms in Croatian) "an alien stock," "less than human," "a dirty, evil breed." He suggested that "one-third of the Serbs should be killed, one-third converted to Catholicism, and one-third forced to emigrate."

Starcevic, whose influence in Croatia in the second half of the 19th century was pervasive, is still regarded as the father of the Croatian nation. He founded the Croatian Party of the Pure Right, which became an inspiration and an ideological home of the 20th-century Croatian Ustashe movement. The Party of the Pure Right still exists and remains active in Yugoslavia. Not surprisingly, Ustashe and a generation of Croatian intellectuals and politicians still use the same terminology as their ideological father.

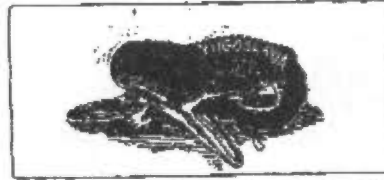
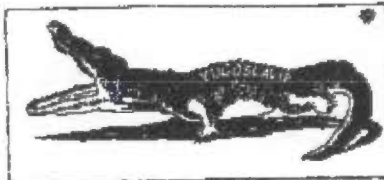
An interview with Croatia's current President Franjo Tudjman published in *The New Yorker* on March 18, 1991 invoked this scurrilous tradition. Speaking about the Serbo-Croat problem, Tudjman said: "Croats belong to

BY MICHAEL MENNARD

OCTOBER 1991 • FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL • 19

a different culture—a different civilization—from the Serbs. . . Croats are a part of Western Europe, part of the Mediterranean tradition. . . The Serbs belong to the East. They use the Cyrillic alphabet, which is Eastern. They are an Eastern people, like the Turks and the Albanians. They belong to the Byzantine culture. . . Despite similarities in language, we cannot be together." Tudjman has also been widely quoted by Croatian newspapers as saying he is elated whenever it occurs to him that his wife is neither a Serb nor a Jew.

Thanks to Starcevic and his disciples, Croats have never felt comfortable in post-World War I Yugoslavia. As soon as they realized that their Austro-Hungarian experience and cultural background were insufficient to take over the new state, the Croats embarked upon a campaign of obstruction and non-cooperation. As part of a long-range plan, the terrorist wing of the Croatian Ustashe assassinated Yugoslav King Alexander I in 1934 and collaborated with Nazi Ger-



many in World War II, while butchering the unsuspecting Serbian minority and other undesirables. The Ustashe staged mass slaughters in some 30 concentration camps created across a

geographically inflated Nazi dominion named the Independent State of Croatia. More than 700,000 persons were destroyed in those camps only because they were Serbs, Jews, or Gypsies.

Although some in the Croatian Catholic Church's hierarchy during World War II tried to stop the genocide (and paid for their courage with their lives), many either condoned and participated in the carnage or saw the panic-stricken Serbian Orthodox population as a promising target for conversion to Roman Catholicism. According to the highly respected historian Victor Novak and other credible sources, some 250,000 Serbs were converted by 1943.

Following World War II, Croatian leaders, Communist and non-Communist alike, ignored the Ustashe's heastly crimes. The leadership, ecclesiastical or lay, made no apology of any kind; neither even conceded to recognize the crime publicly, even though the Ustashe's outrageous activities were declared genocide dur-

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ing the Nuremberg Trials. Instead, many minimized the crimes. Croatia's "democratically elected" President Tudjman, for his part, repeatedly makes unwise and uncharitable statements while conducting a Croatization of the republic's governing apparatus, by bringing in only those Croats who can prove they have four generations of pure Croatian ancestry. Little wonder the Serbs feel unsafe under Croatia's current regime.

Democratic traditions

The Croats professed their own feelings of insecurity during their tenuous union with the Serbs. From the very beginning, the source of Croatia's alleged fears was the so-called Greater Serbia, an early 19th-century concept designed to provide a more effective Christian challenge to the Turkish presence in the Balkans. Serbian history, however, should have reassured Croats. Prior to World War I, Serbia was an independent kingdom with a well-developed political, social, and economic life. Its constitution of 1903 was the latest in the progression of Serbian constitutions that started in 1835, all considered very liberal even by European standards. It provided for a constitutional monarchy, a bicameral legislature, and a multi-party system, with free elections. Freedom of the press was guaranteed. It should be recalled that neither Croatia nor Slovenia was an independent state when the two joined the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Slovenia never had a state of its own; Croatia not since 1102.

The creation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes on December 1, 1918 was by no means a hasty affair. It was the result of dedicated work of the Yugoslav Committee, established in London in 1915, and composed of the Serb, Croat, and Slovene leaders. All but one, a representative from the Kingdom of Serbia, were disgruntled citizens of Austria-Hungary.

For their part, Serbs tried to cooperate and coexist with Croats in the new state. Slovenians played along. There were Slovenians in every single Yugoslav government. Slovene

Catholic priest and politician Dr. Anton Korosec became the first prime minister after King Alexander dismissed the parliament, renamed the country Yugoslavia, and introduced a highly centralized system, mainly because of Croatia's non-cooperation.

The Serbs also gave ample proof of their willingness to share. For example, reparations due Serbia as compensation for virtual destruction of its property and a 50 percent loss of life among its male population were equally divided with Croats and Slovenes. This was done even though Croats and Slovenes fought as allies of the Central Powers and suffered virtually no loss of property and minimal casualties.

As far as Tito's Yugoslavia is concerned, Sestanovich's claim that Serbs had political and military superiority is unfounded. During the past 30 years, no Serbian has held the position of prime minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The current prime minister, the foreign minister, and the minister of economic development—the key positions—are all Croats. Most of the remaining cabinet members are either Croatian or Slovenes. And, the current "collective president," who controls the military forces, is also a Croatian.

After all the obstructionism, hatred, and bad faith, the Serbs would be foolish not to want to part ways with Croats. But so far, nothing has been done to determine how the country's huge foreign debt is going to be paid and by whom. Above all, there are some 600,000 Serbs still living in Croatia, and the Serbs are unlikely to leave them to Croatian extremists as potential fodder for another try at genocide.

Old guard

To survive, Yugoslavia must achieve some sort of accommodation. For that, however, the Yugoslavs must rid themselves of their present leadership of recycled Communists. Most of these leaders have made cosmetic ideological changes, but they still know little beyond what they learned under Tito. Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, for example, whose political flip-flops are well known, is now a "socialist,"

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although he has been quoted in an interview by *Le Monde* saying he has been "a Communist out of conviction since the age of 17." The rest are Tito leftovers: President of Croatia Franjo Tudjman was a World War II Partisan and Yugoslav Army general until jailed for excessive Croatian nationalism. Josip Manolic, until recently prime minister of the Croatian government, was a highly placed officer of UDBA, the Yugoslav version of the Soviet KGB. President of Slovenia Milan Kucan was, for years, the principal ideologue of the Slovene Communist Party, specifically responsible for applying Party doctrine in education. And there are many, many others.

Throughout the years since Tito's death in 1980, the Serbian leadership committed an incomprehensible, mind-boggling error. The Croats conducted a foreign media campaign to convince the world that Tito's federalism was nothing more than a subterfuge for Greater Serbia and Serbian chauvinism, or both. Rather than combat the campaign, the Serbs remained quiet.

When pressed, they gave a pat answer: "Why bother? Any right-minded person knows that truth and justice are on our side." This may have been innocence or just plain Balkan superciliousness. Recently, the Serbs have

ally enjoyed, particularly in this country.

The crooked straight

Assuming that the United States still favors a federation or confederation

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made an effort to present their case through the world's media, but it may be too little and too late to recapture some of the good will they tradition-


tion of Yugoslav states over a broken up, hat-in-hand bunch of "sovereign" states, the largest of them smaller than Indiana, what can the United States do? Precious little, if anything. There is an old folk saying in Yugoslavia: it is like "trying to straighten out the Drina." The Drina is a rapid, meandering river flowing north through the centrally located republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. That is a fair description of what the United States would face if it interceded.

The United States can play a positive role, however, by seeing to it that the cracks now visible in the mediation efforts of the European Community and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe do not become too great. The United States must realize, however, that Yugoslavia, including Croatia, is the Balkans, regardless of what Croatia's current leaders say. There, nothing as important as nationalistic confrontations can be resolved without some bloodshed. For once, the United States should remain on the sidelines, using its great influence only to make sure that fairness prevails. U.S. allies in Europe are in a much better position both to observe and to act, if need be, to keep the Yugoslav crisis under control. For the United States, antagonizing both disputing sides by remaining strictly

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neutral may be just what is needed. The friendship will be easy to restore when the conflict is over and the country needs its shattered economy rebuilt.

Meanwhile, the various Yugoslav emigrant organisations would do well to remain equally aloof. Their ardent support of factions in the "old country" is understandable but unwise, as it only raises unfulfillable expectations. Conspiracies by U.S.-based groups to provide arms, several of which have recently come to light, must be curtailed. The most recent case, in Florida, involved three Croats who tried to purchase and export illegally military hardware from the United States to Croatia, in the amount of \$12 million.

The main problem for Yugoslavia will be that, in the Balkans, anything other than a clear-cut victory is seen as defeat and humiliation. Compromise is an alien, virtually non-existent concept. Some kind of a face-saving device will have to be found, and that, in itself, will be a problem.

What the Yugoslavs need, other than new and truly democratic leadership, is some quiet, unobtrusive mediation, in a dignified atmosphere, conducted by persons or institutions familiar with the area, the peoples, and the centuries-long history of their conflicts. No television limelight, no day-to-day reports, color stories, interviews, in-depth analyses, and no grandstanding. The less exposure to the media, the better. Only in that quiet, undistracting atmosphere can the feuding parties hope to reach some kind of lasting solution to problems. That solution must be their own, accepted and recognized by all.

Michael Mennard, a retired Foreign Service information officer, frequently writes about and visits Yugoslavia. He completed his doctoral dissertation at Georgetown University on "Bishop Strossmayer, the Serbs, and the Croats in the Second Half of the 19th Century."

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