Belgrade BREAKUP

Wracked by civil war, Yugoslavia now looks ungovernable. Yet the roots of the crisis lie deep in the Titoist past. Paul Hockenos spoke to Yugoslavia’s most famous dissident, Milovan Djilas, about the country’s impasse and its origins.

Milovan Djilas, 79, is Yugoslavia’s most famous former dissident. In 1932, the young Montenegrin joined the then-illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia and later led the World War Two underground resistance as a partisan general. After the war, Djilas was Tito’s right-hand man until his democratic objections to Yugoslavia’s course precipitated his expulsion from the party in 1954. As an outspoken critic of the regime, his views and numerous books cost him ten years’ imprisonment. Only in May 1989 did he achieve de facto rehabilitation when he began to appear openly in the media.

As one of postwar Yugoslavia’s founding fathers, how do you feel today as you witness the country’s violent collapse?

I had long predicted the downfall of Tito’s centralised Yugoslavia. Of course, I didn’t suppose that the state would disintegrate so rapidly—although, unlike the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, the evolution of the system here has been in progress for some time. I thought that after so many years of dictatorship the initial reaction of people would be more democratic. I knew, of course, that nationalism would play a great role in Yugoslavia, but I didn’t foresee it being this strong.

Yet, single party rule is over and democratic elections have been held in every republic...

Certainly, elections marked the beginning of a process of democratisation. But the end of communist rule brought different nationalistic movements to power in every republic in Yugoslavia. Regardless of their ideological pretences, there are no essential differences between the regimes in the six Yugoslav republics. While the governments are democratically elected, the parliaments are ineffectual and the oppositions everywhere are very weak. The means of information are by and large tightly controlled. In Belgrade and Zagreb, as well as Skopje and Ljubljana, what we have now are autocratic nationalistic governments in power.
How do you explain the intensity and ferocity of nationalism in Yugoslavia today?

Nationalism, of course, has deep roots here. The Croats, for example, have been obsessed with the creation of their own state since the 13th century. But four decades of communist dictatorship haven't helped any. The communists blocked the growth of a democratic consciousness here by suppressing every form of opposition—particularly democratic opposition.

Nationalism was also suppressed but, unlike democracy, it is a spontaneous movement. In the new political space, nationalist populist groups found the national ideologies easy to manipulate. The Serb and Croat ruling parties launched fierce nationalistic campaigns against one another that fanned hatred and laid the basis for military conflict.

So, the break-up of post-Tito Yugoslavia was inevitable?

In its communist form—yes. Maybe if Tito had been more elastic much earlier on, less orthodox in his ideology, things would look different today. I advocated a step by step process of democratisation in the early 1950s. But Tito was a dictator, and dictators demand full control.

War is already a reality. What are your thoughts as Yugoslavia slides ever deeper into civil war again after 45 years?

This is a crazy war because it is one that nobody will win. Even if we imagine a Serbian or Croatian victory, the essential problems will remain the same. Let's say that Serbia wins and takes Croatian land, Croatia will always be eager to take that territory back again. Of course, I am very worried and I ask myself what can I do. But I'm too old now to participate in politics. There isn't a social democratic organisation that suits me at the moment and I have no desire to serve any particular leadership.

Many observers today lay the brunt of the blame at the feet of the Serbian government. Can one speak of Serbia as the aggressor, pressing for a Greater Serbia at the territorial expense of the other republics?

No side is exclusively guilty. During elections last year, the leader of the nationalistic Croat party, now Croat President Franjo Tudjman, expressed his intention to create a Greater Croatia. That meant taking parts of Bosnia, as well as Serbia and Montenegro. Now, because they have suffered great losses on the battlefield, they hope simply to maintain Croatia's present frontiers. Under the pretext of defending the Serb minority there, the Serbian leadership—and now the army too—is attacking some parts of northeastern Croatia, where Croats constitute the majority of the population. From my point of view this is a war of invasion.

The story is somewhat different in the Krajina region of southern Croatia, where Serbs in fact constitute the majority. The Serbs there do have a right to some form of autonomy which the newly-elected Croat government denied them. They felt endangered, and the Serbs are a people very strongly inclined to protect the Serbian minority in Croatia. The memories of the Ustashe [World War Two Croatian fascists] massacres are still very much alive in the Serb consciousness.

Yet surely Serbia's intentions to impose its hegemony over large parts of Yugoslavia has been clear for some time now.

Serbia, as a republic, is not formally involved in the conflict. It was the Serbian minority in Croatia that started to revolt and the Croatian militia suppressed them. In the beginning, the army was more or less neutral. Nevertheless, the Serbs can't justify such a large military response. The political leadership of Krajina which, indeed, is backed by Serbia seems intent on enlarging its own ethnic territory. They are even speaking of the Dalmatian port of Zadar as Serbian.

The aims of Serbia's President Milosevic are still unclear. Although his rhetoric is that of a united Yugoslavia, his moves to expand Serbian influence are anti-Yugoslav. But that doesn't necessarily mean that he wouldn't settle for national rights and autonomy for the Serb minorities in a reworked Yugoslavia. I am afraid, however, that he is more inclined to enlarge Serbia which implicitly spells war in Croatia as well as in neighbouring Bosnia and elsewhere, such as the overwhelming ethnic Albanian province of Kosovo. If there is a rebellion in Kosovo, Albania itself will
go to war. Albania may be weak and demoralised, but Albanians in Kosovo are unanimous and intensely inspired along national lines.

Croatia and Slovenia both base their claims to independence on the right of nations to self-determination. The application of this right is obviously problematic in such ethnically mixed regions as Croatia and Bosnia. But, on the other hand, can it be denied?

**The republics' positions are all riddled with hypocrisy**

Theoretically, everybody has this right but, in practice, we are not so free. Neither Croatia nor Bosnia can separate without sparking war. If Croatia has the right to self-determination, say the Serbs, then so does the Serb minority—and they will elect to join Serbia proper. The republics' different positions are all riddled with hypocrisy. While the Serbs demand the right to separate from Croatia, they deny the same prerogative to the Albanians in Kosovo. Since Slovenia is ethnically homogeneous, and her present republican frontiers are in harmony with her ethnic borders, she can become independent. Macedonia, maybe, can too, but it will find itself threatened from the Bulgarian and Albanian side as well as Serbian. Frontiers are nearly impossible to define within Yugoslavia. But, then, the question of borders is the problem of all of Europe, not only Yugoslavia.

As the war in Croatia has escalated, the federal army has intervened with increasing force on behalf of the Serbs. How do you explain this development?

Longer than any other institution in Yugoslavia, the army stuck by the old communist ideology of federal Yugoslavia. Yet, with time, even it began to understand that this was obsolete. The independence drives of the republics prompted a belated but parallel disintegration within the army. The military hierarchy simply replaced their communist values with nationalist orientations. Now all republics, with the exception of Serbia, insist upon their own republican army. The generals from Slovenia, Macedonia, Croatia and Bosnia are actively promoting desertion from the army. Thus, although the army is formally Yugoslav, in practice it is ever more Serbian. Under the pretext of maintaining a federal Yugoslavia, the army is, in fact, backing the Serbs in Croatia.

The outlook appears so grim. Is a resolution to the crisis anywhere in sight?

Unless some qualitatively new factors arise, I don’t see this war coming to an end in the near future. At the same time, I still don’t believe that an all-out Balkan war is inevitable. The people are not enthusiastic about the war, even in Serbia.

The European institutions have a key role to play in Yugoslavia. The latest decision to hold a peace conference for Yugoslavia is positive. In contrast to earlier initiatives that were empty, this move promises something concrete. I’ve been extremely disappointed with the European diplomacy until now. There haven’t been any real achievements, only propositions, declarations and promises. The German and Austrian moves to recognise Slovenian and Croatian independence had negative repercussions. On the one hand, they encouraged Croats to continue the civil war as a means to win international recognition. On the other hand, the possibility of an independent Croatia only frightened the Serb minority further, prompting them to step up their revolt.

How, then, do you envision the nations and ethnic minorities of Yugoslavia living together?

The one way out for Yugoslavia is to move itself towards a liberal, democratic state. I envision a completely new structure for Yugoslavia—something between federation and confederation. That means a state organised with completely independent life for equal republics and, at the same time, with a strong centre. The republics must agree upon a common army, common monetary and foreign policy, and common guaranteed human rights.

But isn’t it already too late for this? Hasn’t a united Yugoslavia already been rejected?

It can’t be too late because there isn’t any other way to avoid all-out war. A structure similar to the one I have in mind was basically proposed last month by the presidents of Bosnia and Macedonia. All the republican leaders agreed but, then, the next day, some of them backed away.

Yugoslavs watched the recent crisis in the Soviet Union with particular interest. How have the events there affected Yugoslavia?

It was telling that the Serbian leadership was the only government in Europe that didn’t condemn the putsch. In a similar boat, the Soviet Union had sheltered Serbia and army hardliners. I think Moscow will now adopt a position closer to that of the West Europeans, thus isolating Serbia even more.

Yugoslavia could use its own Gorbachev today. But neither is that person in sight nor, honestly, do I feel that he or she could really counter the tide of nationalism here. I think that the crisis in the Soviet Union will resolve itself more easily than in Yugoslavia.

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