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Disintegration and the Collapse of the State (1989 to 1991)

1989: The Beginning of the End

As communist regimes collapsed one after another throughout Eastern Europe, centrifugal forces in the multinational state of Yugoslavia grew stronger and the crisis there reached an unprecedented, dramatic climax. Political deadlocks prevented any hope of an orderly transfer to multiparty democracy and a market economy. The adversaries Slovenia and Serbia entrenched themselves ever deeper in what were, in principle, incompatible standpoints. Unfortunately, the Yugoslav political system did not have a procedure with which to solve such a conflict. Both sides remained unrelenting. They were willing to violate the system’s established checks and balances and thus completely undermine the legitimacy of time-proven institutions like the constitutional court. From this point on, all that counted were the particular interests of each republic—the common good of Yugoslavia as a whole no longer mattered.

In one last major effort to turn things around at the end of 1988, the federal parliament introduced privatization and abolished the system of socialist property rights and self-management. However, it lost the battle against inflation, which was galloping at a rate of 2,700 percent, because the republics refused to reduce their expenditures substantially. On the advice of the International Monetary Fund, Prime Minister Ante Marković implemented a shock therapy in December modeled after Poland’s example: he froze wages, stopped subsidies, and introduced the strict monitoring of expenditures. Although he succeeded in stabilizing the currency within a few months, many ailing government-owned enterprises still could not survive the liberal market competition. In mid-1990, the rates of growth and production both plummeted, and in December every other job was endangered by the new radically neoliberal course.¹

Growing tension in Kosovo pushed the Serbian parliament in March 1989 to rescind the province’s autonomy for all practical purposes. In doing so,
Belgrade improved its ability to enforce its authority over the entire republic, but at the same time it squandered any remaining trust in the federal state. In light of the impending change of Kosovo’s status, various associations of Slovene intellectuals called for a major rally in Ljubljana to demonstrate solidarity with the Kosovars. Demonstrators wore stickers with a Star of David and the words “Kosovo, my homeland.” The parallels drawn to the Holocaust through this action angered the Serbian public, and within twenty-four hours a million people had gathered in front of the federal parliament building in Belgrade. They chanted “Slovenia lies!” and “Slovenia is a traitor!” The crowd directed all its hate against the Albanians and their Slovenian sponsors.²

Slobodan Milošević, who had become the president of Serbia in May 1989, continued to work single-mindedly toward the destruction of Yugoslav federalism à la Kardelj. In doing so, he whipped up other peoples’ fears of Serb hegemonic politics and gave the rebellious regions a concrete reason to reject thoroughly any cooperation with Belgrade. The Kosovars boycotted Serbian institutions, and Ljubljana warned that the republic’s party could declare independence if Belgrade failed to desist in its efforts to maintain its majority position.

In July 1989, Milošević presented a comprehensive proposal for constitutional reform in Yugoslavia in which the principle of consensus at the federal level would be replaced with qualified majority decision making. Milan Kučan countered by calling for an “asymmetrical federation.” Each republic would separately negotiate its relations with the federation, whereby some would forfeit more sovereignty and others less to the central government.³ Because this proposal could not get the backing it needed, the Slovenian parliament amended the Slovenian constitution in September 1989 by adding the right to self-determination and secession. “First of all we are Slovenes and only then Communists,” elaborated Milan Kučan at an urgently called Central Committee meeting in Belgrade where he felt he was being threatened with JNA military intervention.⁴ Both the collective executive leadership at the federal level and the federal constitutional court immediately declared the constitutional changes null and void—to no avail. In November there was a scandal when the Slovenian police decided to forbid demonstrators from Serbia from entering Slovenia. In response, Belgrade broke all bilateral trade relations with Slovenia; in turn, Ljubljana refused to make its contribution to the federal development fund.⁵

By the time the League of Communists met in January 1990 for its fourteenth extraordinary congress, the relations between the republics were already thoroughly poisoned. Slovenia’s delegates could not find sufficient support for their renewed demands for more autonomy and subsequently walked out of the congress in disgust. The Croats then refused to continue any debate on reform.
The congress was adjourned, and soon after that Tito’s party, the guarantor of “brotherhood and unity” in the multinational state, broke apart.

Meanwhile, the communist systems in the entire Eastern bloc were also falling apart. Soon after his ascension to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the introduction of glasnost and perestroika and thus paved the way for democratic elections and change throughout all of Eastern Europe. Since Moscow finally allowed its long-time allies to choose whatever form of government they wanted in 1989, thus withdrawing its latent threat to intervene, all resistance against the transformation to a democratic market economy soon dissipated. Communism left Europe, and the Cold War ended. With the restructuring of the international order, the crucial foreign policy pillars of the Yugoslav model crumbled: socialism, nonalignment, and self-management became superfluous once the Cold War came to an end. Tito’s strongest trump card had been outplayed: the Soviet military threat no longer existed.

Gradually it began to dawn on the West that something was brewing in Yugoslavia. Europe seemed to be growing together, which meant that Yugoslavia was losing its superb strategic importance for the United States and Western Europe as a buffer to the Eastern bloc. Consequently, it also meant that the country was losing its privileged access to cheap credit. In the foreign ministries of Western countries, other events had priority, such as the ramifications of German reunification, the Iraq War, the putsch in Moscow, and the Maastricht Treaty. The United States now relegated Yugoslavia to the status of a European problem. But no one in Europe found the time and interest to work out a strategy for overcoming the crisis of the collapsing multinational state.

**Multiparty Democracy**

As was happening all over Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia’s political leadership decided to hold elections in the course of 1990. Instead of being the first step in the transition to a stable democracy, however, the democratic transformation worked like a fire accelerant, setting ablaze issues of ethnicity and disintegration. The emerging spectrum of parties was organized along the lines of ethnic identity, not political programs. The socialist system had operated according to the principle of collective power sharing and “national key,” so that the logic behind having quotas had long been put into practice. Many people believed that only their own national party would represent them well in difficult times. This allowed the new ethnopolitical elites to mobilize populist support easily for their program, without having to make concessions to democratic procedure. Mass rallies suggested plebiscitary approval and camouflaged the fact that an authoritarian style of leadership and the political control of the media continued to be commonplace. The knee-jerk support for
ethnic solidarity explains how Slobodan Milošević was able to further consolidate his power position, but also why nonreligious people from Bosnia tended to support an Islamic-leaning party. In the spring of 1990, only 26 percent of the Slovenes, 48 percent of the Croats, 49 percent of the Albanians, 68 percent of the Macedonians, 71 percent of the Serbs, 80 percent of the Montenegrins, and 84 percent of the Muslims identified with the Yugoslav state. Nine out of ten Yugoslavs considered the relations between the various peoples and republics to be bad or even very bad.

Across the entire country, nationalist-oriented parties were formed. For those who supported a Yugoslav stance, the only parties committed to the cause were the Union of Reform Forces of Yugoslavia led by Ante Marković and the League of Communists. In Slovenia and Croatia, the parties that prevailed in the elections of April 1990 were those that championed independence. In Slovenia the multiparty alliance DEMOS led by Jože Pučnik won a clear majority of 55 percent of the vote. The result was not so clear in Croatia, where the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ) under Franjo Tudjman won 42.2 percent while the League of Communists of Croatia–Party of Democratic Reform (SKH-SDP) received 37.3 percent. The plurality voting system turned this slight lead into a crushing majority of 58 percent of the seats in the three chambers of parliament and a majority of 67.5 percent in the most powerful of these, the lower house. Stipe Mesić became prime minister and Franjo Tudjman president. In Macedonia the nationalist forces also prevailed in the form of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). In Serbia and Montenegro, however, the socialists remained in power. In December 1990, Slobodan Milošević’s Socialist Party of Serbia won 194 of the 250 parliament seats up for election. In Montenegro the League of Communists won 83 of 125 mandates and its leader, Momir Bulatović, the presidency. The most difficult situation was that in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where three ethnically affiliated parties dominated the elections in November and December 1990: the Muslim Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije, SDA) with 87 seats, the Serbian Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS) with 71, and the Croatian HDZ-BiH with 44 mandates. True to the Yugoslav political tradition of power sharing, they created a government coalition.

In all of the republics, the new parties called for solidarity of their respective nation. Franjo Tudjman’s pledge to deliver Croatian statehood relied on mobilizing not only the masses in Croatia, but also the political émigrés whom he had invited to the HDZ congress held in Zagreb in February 1990. He also counted on the backing of the Herzegovina lobby, a strong pillar of his support within his party, when he demanded the right to self-determination “of the entire Croat people within its natural and historical borders.”
campaign slogans of the HDZ promised that Croatia would “be defended at the Drina” and that “Herzegovina is Croatia.” Later about 400,000 Bosnian Croats received Croatian citizenship, including the right to vote.

Transnational networks were probably decisive in these elections. The HDZ depended highly on “emigrant Croatia” (iseljena Hrvatska), especially as Tudjman had been systematically building his party since 1987 with the financial help of exile groups in the United States and Canada, including that of rightwing extremists who distributed maps of Croatia showing the borders of 1941. Tudjman co-opted the “diaspora,” assuming that its members were victims of a divided people that needed to be reunited. Using the catchword “reconciliation” (pomirenje), he encouraged all Croat exiles and guest workers to return to their homeland in the spring of 1990.

In Bosnia, Alija Izetbegović also campaigned with his party, SDA, for Muslim unity, for the unification of “our people” who lived along “the long belt of land from Novi Pazar to Cazin, interspersed with Serbs and Croats.” More precisely he strove to mobilize the Slavic Muslims in Sandžak, the region of the homeland “occupied” by Serbia and Montenegro. Therefore he demanded that this region be given a special autonomous status. At campaign rallies the crowds cheered and chanted “Sandžak is ours!” and “Sandžak is Bosnian!”

The SDA used religious rituals to appeal to the nationalist feelings of a largely secularized Muslim population. Campaign events started with religious forms of greeting, and the party’s green flag featured the crescent. In 1991, Izetbegović proposed that Bosnia-Herzegovina enter the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). At the same time, the SDA attracted traditionalist, laicist-liberal, religiously conservative, and Islamic fundamentalist supporters. To Muslims, the anomic state of Bosnian society appeared to offer no other source of strength, cohesion, and stability than the affiliation with the Bosniak nation, whose patron the SDA rose to become. Because religion now represented the foremost distinctive characteristic of ethnicity, Islamic symbolism also appealed to the secularized part of the electorate.

Another influential factor was the transborder mobilization of Yugoslav Albanians. In December 1989, the writer Ibrahim Rugova founded the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës, LDK) with hundreds of offshoot party groups in Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Canada. His Kosovar shadow government, which set up its headquarters in Bonn in 1991, leveled a 3 percent solidarity tax on its fellow countrymen in order to support the political struggle back home.

The Hot Spot, Eastern Bosnia

Bosnia-Herzegovina lay in the crosshairs of the germinating controversy over Yugoslavia’s territorial inheritance since Croat and Serb nationalists each claimed the region and the Muslims considered it the very heart of their
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homeland. Therefore, nationalism thrived also in local politics. Because the nationalist propaganda of the Serbs, the Croats, and the Muslims was especially prevalent in multiethnic communities, the local newspapers tried to outdo each other in their accusations about who was exploiting, threatening, and supposedly soon driving away whom—very similar to the way things had developed earlier in Kosovo.¹⁹

At campaign rallies, powerful slogans beckoned people to support the common cause. Nationalist-oriented Serbs let themselves get caught up in the assertion repeated over and over again that the Serbian people had to assert themselves in a never-ending battle that required them to constantly be on their guard against persecution. In August 1990, the Muslim-leaning SDA held a mass commemoration for the victims of Chetnik violence during the Second World War in Foča. As a sign of forgiveness, it was planned to throw flowers from the historical bridge over the Drina. The Serbs who were invited to the event suspected it to be an open provocation and instead commemorated those persecuted in the Ustasha state.²⁰

Tensions were building to dangerous levels in many areas, such as in the Eastern Bosnia town of Srebrenica, where local chapters of the new parties were formed in August 1990. An uneasiness spread as supporters of the Serb SDS raced through the center of town in an open car, outfitted with knives for everyone to see and giving the three-finger Serb salute. They did the same in Potočari, prompting people to throw rocks at them. The leading candidate of the Serb party, Miodrag Jokić, then gave a flaming campaign speech in which he declared his hometown to be inalienably Serbian land. As he spoke, supporters of the Muslim SDA gathered in front of the local culture center, waving green flags and yelling: “We want weapons, we want weapons!” Tensions spiraled upward throughout the evening, creating an explosive situation. In Kravica, Serbs built barricades and the Muslims followed suit in “their” municipalities.²¹

Here, as in other places, the tone of the election campaign rallies became increasingly aggressive. The SDA politician Ibran Mustafić attacked his political opponent, calling him Satan and saying that a stake should be driven through his heart to keep him from becoming a vampire. Another SDA man, Hamed Salihović threatened: “We will deepen the Drina, so that the enemy, the dušman, cannot cross it!” And yet another, Besim Ibišević predicted: “With our votes we will destroy the two greatest evils: communism and Yugoslavia . . . the prison of the Bosniak people!”²² As these men spoke, the crowd shouted: “We want weapons!” and “Long live Saddam Hussein!”²³

The campaign rhetoric had no causal connection whatsoever to the real problems that society was facing, but many people felt that the simple messages from the new leaders spoke to their concerns. Key terms like “people” and “nation” helped reduce complex, often unfathomable events to seemingly
obvious interests shared by their ethnic community. They were being offered a
simple interpretation of the way things stood, and many were glad to embrace
it in light of the fear, uncertainty, and helplessness that plagued them.²⁴ The
new party leaders interpreted the staged approval of the masses as a mandate
to refuse all willingness to negotiate. All that counted now was what the na-
tion (allegedly) demanded: to implement a people’s own interests without any
consideration of the needs of the others.

Preparations for Independence
Immediately after the elections, preparations began in Slovenia, Croatia, and
Kosovo for independence. On 2 July 1990, both the Slovenian and the Croatian
parliaments voted with overwhelming majorities to declare their sovereignty,
as did a group of members of parliament from Kosovo. The Slovenian foreign
minister Dimitrij Rupel rejoiced in announcing that “Yugoslavia no longer
exists.”²⁵ In December 1990, 88.5 percent of the Slovenian citizens voted in
favor of independence in a referendum. The objection of the constitutional
court was simply ignored.

The presidents of Slovenia and Croatia pushed ahead with a proposal to
transform Yugoslavia into a confederation of sovereign states, de facto no more
than a loosely organized customs and monetary union. When the Yugoslav
government under Ante Marković convened a meeting between the leaders
of the republics for the last time in December 1990, to debate constitutional
reform, only a whisper of a chance still existed to save Yugoslavia, because
the federation simply no longer possessed any legitimacy and authority.

Still bitter about the rescindment of Kosovo’s autonomy, Albanians chose
a path of open confrontation. They set up their own parallel state with a gov-
ernment, presidency, and systems for taxation, education, and health care.
In September 1990, they presented the constitution for a sovereign republi
c. A year later a referendum was held on the question of independence.

The step-by-step disintegration of Yugoslavia put its strongest institu-
tion to the test: the Yugoslav People’s Army was fast becoming an armed
force without a country. In March 1990, Slovenia and Croatia began to build
their own police and military forces and collected millions in donations from
abroad to buy weapons.²⁶ General Kadijević declared publicly a month later
that the People’s Army was prepared to use “all means necessary” to defend
the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia—an open threat to intervene.²⁷

In the spring of 1991, Yugoslavia entered another stage in the irreversible
process of its dissolution. The parties began to make concrete preparations for
war.²⁸ The final straw came in May when Serbian and Montenegrin leaders
blocked Croatia’s Stipe Mesić from assuming the office of the federal presi-
dency, as he was scheduled to do according to the rotation principle. He had
publicly boasted that he would be the last president of Yugoslavia, only to retract that statement later. This left Yugoslavia with no head of state and no commander in chief of the armed forces. All of the other components of Yugoslav statehood vanished. Identities and loyalties were being redefined, and the long-applied mechanisms of power sharing and mediation no longer existed. The collapse of the political order, the disintegration of the multiethnic spheres, and the loss of the state monopoly of power created a dangerous vacuum. Anyone closely observing the situation at the time could already sense that the country was headed toward a highly explosive conflict.

**The Radicalization of the “Serbian Question”**

With the impending demise of Yugoslavia, the “Serbian Question” that had first arisen in the nineteenth century resurfaced. In 1991, more than a fourth of the Serb people of 8 million lived outside their own republic: 580,000 were in Croatia (12.2 percent), another 1.4 million lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina (31 percent), and 200,000 (10 percent) were threatened with separation from Serbia by the secession of historically significant Kosovo. Why should Serbs tolerate the division of their people just as the Germans were celebrating their reunification?

In Serbia, a consensus evolved across all the parties: the objective to be defended above all others in this historical situation was the national unity of the Serb people. Even formerly critical intellectuals were convinced that Serbian president Milošević finally had to rectify the historic injustice inflicted on his people. In January 1991, Milošević expressed what many people were feeling when he declared: “The fate of Yugoslavia can only be decided by the peoples [not the republics]. . . . And administrative borders cannot simply be declared as national borders. . . . As far as the Serb people are concerned, they want to live together in one nation state. Therefore, any partition that divides the Serb people and disperses them among several sovereign states is unacceptable.” This message reverberated in catchy slogans like “One State for All Serbs!” and “Only Unity Can Save the Serbs!” At the same time, the other republics were also insisting on their sovereignty. For them, any change to the existing borders was completely out of the question.

The Serbs living in Croatia were motivated not only by hegemonic claims, injured national pride, and resentment over the fait accompli of national borders, they were also truly afraid. They felt embittered that the new constitution of their homeland defined the country as the “national state of the Croats,” thereby denigrating all other ethnic groups to the status of minorities. The introduction of old-new state symbols prompted concern and anger and evoked memories of the Second World War. Zagreb selected the historic red and white checked šahovnica (chessboard coat of arms) as the emblem on its
national flag, which is 500 years older than fascism but had been usurped by the Ustasha state during the war. Although the sequence of the colors in the checked pattern was different, this was not sufficient to dash the fears of anti-Serb sentiments. What did it mean that the Croatian language was being “cleansed,” that the kuna was introduced as the country’s currency (as it had been in the fascist era), and that streets and public buildings were being renamed after such people as the writer Mile Budak, the guiding spirit behind the persecution of the Serbs under Ante Pavelić?  

Nationalist Serbs came up with a simple antidote to the threatening independence of Croatia: if the Croats decided in favor of secession from the federation, the Serbs in Croatia would simply insist on remaining in Yugoslavia. After all, in the (so-called) Krajina, Serbs were in the majority and could count on strong allies on the other side of the Bosnia-Herzegovina border.

On 25 July 1990, just a few weeks after the parliament in Zagreb announced its declaration of sovereignty, the Serbs declared the “sovereignty and autonomy of the Serb people in Croatia.” They set up street blockades. “We saw many people from our village with arms,” remembered one contemporary. “Hunting rifles, but not weapons from the army. They gathered in the village center and discussed what to do at night. They were frightened that the Croats would come at night to kill Serbs.” In August of that year, policemen in Knin refused to hiss the hated šahovnica, thus igniting the first armed conflicts. When Croatia held a referendum on independence on 19 May 1991, Croatian Serbs initiated a boycott and voted in favor of remaining in Yugoslavia in a plebiscite that they had organized themselves. Incidents of armed conflict then occurred in Pakrac, in the Plitvice National Park, and in Borovo Selo.

**War on Their Minds**

The less the political class was willing to compromise, the more the confrontation was fought out in the media. The new rulers took control, especially of the state television. In October 1990, Yugoslav president Borisav Jović lamented “the wave of hatred and national prejudice” and the “open information and propaganda war” between the republics. “The media war has assumed such intensity that the opposing sides can be considered belligerents.”

Like all other Yugoslav institutions, the media system was undergoing an internal process of disintegration. Previously, the Yugoslav broadcasting system had coordinated the eight studios operating in the republics, and each studio contributed its part to what was then compiled into a common program. After a period of great disgruntlement occurred over problems with this coordination in the 1980s, the broadcast stations started to send their own correspondents to neighboring republics and to produce their own news.
In 1988, Zagreb and then Sarajevo pulled out of the nationwide television and radio cooperation. When the Serbs celebrated the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1989 and Slobodan Milošević held a major speech in commemoration of it, eight different camera crews bustled about at the historic site of the Gazimestan monument in Kosovo. Each reported its own version of the events. Forgotten was the maxim on which Tito’s policy for disseminating information had been based, namely to criticize only the nationalism expressed in one’s own republic, not that in the others. Now the media was immersed in attacks on other ethnic groups, and clear enemy images were used to distinguish between “us” and “them.”

The print press, radio, and television dedicated much of their reporting to historical topics, particularly to the atrocities of the Second World War. All sides gathered evidence with which to cultivate their own victimization and to incite a collective feeling of revenge. One example was the Serbian daily newspaper Politika in 1990 when it published headlines for stories on Croatia that read “1941 Started with the Same Methods!” and “The Genocide Is Not Allowed to Happen Again.” Likewise, the Croatian newspaper Vjesnik reported on a Serbian “doomsday plan” and Croatian television on “Chetnik Lunacy” in May 1991. The Serb writer Dobrica Ćosić said in a television broadcast in August 1991 that one of the greatest sins of his generation had been their wish to forget the crimes of the Ustasha regime.

In 1990, the Bosnian politician Adil Zufilkarpašić repeatedly sought Muslims who wanted to take revenge for the events of 1942. “I . . . asked them, how they envisioned to do this—after all, we were now dealing with another generation, and the times were also different.” But it was difficult to argue against the mainstream, when politicians, the media, clergy, and intellectuals were tooting the same horn.

However, public opinion was not at all dominated by outright enthusiasm for war. Instead, a yearning for normality was growing. In many areas, protests and demonstrations against intolerance and hate were held in 1990 by women’s, youth, and veteran organizations, as well as the trade unions. A poll taken in Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Mostar in May 1990 showed that a large majority hoped with fatalistic optimism that the crisis could be overcome, and only a minority feared civil war. The public became gradually and rather subliminally attuned to war as somber metaphors crept into people’s vocabulary. Words like “fate,” “soul,” “martyr,” “exodus,” and “genocide” evoked a situation of existential threat in which the opposing sides seemed to be quarreling no longer over negotiable conflicts of interest, but over historically determined or strictly moral issues of principle. In January 1991, the leadership of Croatia announced apodictically that it would not negotiate any
solution that did not lead to independence, while the Serbian side proved to be no less stubborn in saying that they would not consider any option that would destroy the state of Yugoslavia.

No conflict must inevitably and unstoppably lead to catastrophe. At any time, immediately before and even after war broke out, there would have been opportunities to turn the ship around. But too many people were grimly prepared to assert the supposedly greater national interests at any price. In January 1991, the writer Slavenka Drakulić realized: “The war is already here. I know that now. It tricked me—it tricked us all. Its onset already lies in the fact that we expect it.”

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