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THE DESPAIR THAT IS YUGOSLAVIA

by Paul Mojzes

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Even in the best of times Yugoslavia was called "the despair of tidy minds" by those who knew it well. Today Yugoslavia is simply—despair. The country may or may not be dead as a federal state. The situation has deteriorated from untidy to near chaotic. Several years ago Prof. Srdjan Vrcan of Split University said that all options are possible for Yugoslavia, but in the meantime a number of the options, such as an orderly and peaceful transition to democracy or a return to a totalitarian dictatorship are eliminated. Regretfully, the most likely option is the Lebanonization of Yugoslavia, namely a protracted, confusing civil war with no sight to the solution of the conflict.

Yugoslavia is not in just a danger of a civil, or more accurately nationalities war because the war, still of a relatively low intensity, has already commenced. In the spring of 1991 a Croatian journalist answering the question whether the country is at war answered in the negative because she said that as long as the names of those killed are known and they are mourned it is not war. Her optimism is based on the acknowledgement that Balkan conflicts tend to be so violent that tens and hundreds of thousands are killed so as to make normal burials and the identification of the dead impossible. By the summer the conflict between the federal army and the armed and civilian forces of the two republics that declared independence, Slovenia and Croatia were added to the frequent ethnic killings.1 At least several people die each week.

One of the noticeable changes is that the cult of Tito, which lasted 45 years, is gone. While he is still frequently mentioned it is seldom any longer by his popular nickname (except in rare positive references) but more likely by his last name, Broz. Broz is now considered widely, even by those who once extravagantly lauded him, as the cause of many

1See "Panzer gegen die Unabhängigkeit: 'Jugoslawien ist Tot,'" Stern (July 4, 1991), pp.10-20 for graphic documentation of the killings.

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of the troubles that befell the country as a whole and the many diverse units that make this a "land of the damned."

Admittedly there are currently some improvements when compared to the Titoist period. Reasonably free elections were held in all republics and regions except in Kosovo where the Albanian majority boycotted the elections. The multi-party system has been introduced with a vengeance. There are about 200 political parties and the abbreviations of their names stymie even the seasoned reporters, who must resort to an index of party names to help them through the maze. In the Serbian presidential election there were 39 presidential candidates; a hundred signatures sufficed to assure a place on the ballot!

The elections resulted in an anomaly, namely that parts of the country are ruled by anti-Communist parties that are quickly moving away from socialist practices while other parts of the country (especially Serbia and Montenegro) are ruled by pro-socialist parties that wish to retain features of the socialist system along with market-oriented practices, though, they too profess that Communism as it used to be practiced is dead. (There even seems to be practically no one who used to be a Communist!) Outwardly a good deal of the discussion between the political leaders is about how to proceed to dismantle the former socialized economy and totalitarian system but much of it is a smoke screen for the embattled ethnic war and political ambitions of the ethnic leaders who eagerly resort to the methods of the previous regime which they profess to have rejected. The most influential Serb and Croat leaders, Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman, had successful party and army careers respectively under Tito and show equally great stubbornness in pursuing their goals. Commitment to nationalism replaced their commitment to communism.

Political and civil rights are being established for the first time in history although not smoothly. The press is free and even the most outrageous views get publicized though some of the newspapers, particularly those that were the most read (e.g. Politika and Vjesnik) became the uncritical voice of this or that ethno-political party. The tragedy is that the media and many publications unabashedly spread hatred and intolerance of other nationalities and their political leaders. After 45 years of Communism people, especially the leaders, continue to use the old Bolshevik political arsenal to destroy the opposition. This time some of them added a dose of fascist-like racism! The situation looks frighteningly like a repeat of the civil war that took place during World War II, with many people still expecting to take revenge for whatever injustices they think were perpetrated against them. In Yugoslavia, it

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2The Slovenian and Croatian political leaders and the press have successfully spread the notion in the West that the Serbians are pro-Bolshevik. This is no more true than the Serbian claim that the Croatian leadership is genocidally pro-fascist. All parties in the conflict have unashamedly spread lies about the others. There are no good guys and bad guys in this conflict; all have contributed to the embittered situation.
seems, there are only victims of injustice; no one is willing to admit that his/her own group may have been the persecutor!

Religion has likewise been freed from its previous second-class status. The three large religious organizations, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Islamic League have become uncritical supporters of their respective national aspirations, thus again reasserting the traditional bond between nation and religion. National and religious pride has been restored with much flag waving and media attention to religious worship services and personalities. This is good. But national and religious chauvinism threatens to transform it into malice.

Constitutionally an impasse has been reached between supporters of a federal model, confederate model, and those who aim to secede altogether. Sovereignty and independence are the universally accepted slogans but differences abound on how to exercise these lofty ideas. In the present heated atmosphere where hatred prevails over moderate self-interest the leaders of the various ethnic units have tended to resort to inflammatory rhetoric and hardened positions that seem to promote extremism rather than compromise and assurances that the rights of those who are different will be respected. The nationalistic euphoria might give way to more realistic bargaining in two or three years, but the heavily armed protagonists (and nowadays 'everybody' is armed!) who are spurred on by the hotheads can not wait that long without plunging into war.

The Yugoslav army is currently the only nation-wide institution but it too has lost the confidence of much of the population. Among the non-Serbs there is suspicion that the army is intervening on behalf of Serbian interests as Serbs dominate its commanding corps. Some Serbians on the other hand think of the army as the continuation of Titoist Communist policies which are no longer deemed appropriate. Thus far the army intervened with some restraint, except in its intervention in Slovenia in an attempt to assert the federal control of borders and air-space. Violence also erupted sporadically in the army's intervention in Croatia. Slovenia and Croatia hastened to establish their own military/police units amidst great controversy whether these are unconstitutional paramilitary units or units approved by legally elected governments for the protection of the respective republics. National aspirations for a greater Serbia, greater Croatia, greater Macedonia, greater Albania and so forth make cooperation among the ethnic neighbors well-nigh impossible. Yet, paradoxically, they all profess that they wish to join a united Europe. What makes it likely that they would succeed politically and economically in a United Europe when they are unable to achieve even a modicum of decent cooperation with their immediate neighbors? Would the several independent countries carved out of Yugoslavia be economically and politically viable, especially if they live in constant animosity with each other?
At the end of June 1991 the Croatian and Slovenian government carried out their declared intention to be independent and sovereign states. The federal government is unable to work out the kind of consensus that the constitution unrealistically envisioned. Benevolent urging and pressure by the European and U.S. political leaders has had very limited success but is better than nothing. Outside military intervention is unlikely, though some in Yugoslavia are hoping for it, since outsiders cannot solve problems which the people who live there are unwilling or unable to solve. Indeed, this is the case: they themselves are unable to solve the protracted crisis. It is evident that most people there have taken leave of their good senses and are acting now mostly on raw emotions of which the strongest is hatred of the other ethnic group and a herding instinct which limits individual's rights to dissent from their group.

The religious communities have not helped much to solve the crisis; some have even added fuel to the fire. In May Patriarch Paul of the Serbian Orthodox Church invited Franjo Cardinal Kuharic of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia to Sremski Karlovci where they issued a well-meaning appeal stressing Christian principles over nationalist excesses. The media gave due attention to the event. But this was both too late and too little. Some clergy actually spread intolerance; a Croatian religious journalist who espouses reconciling attitudes complained that some Catholic priests urged that he be arrested for sowing confusion among the people of God, who should be like-minded! The conclusion is inescapable that the local churches have not even tried hard much less been effective in peace-making.

The international religious community is likewise passive in its attitude toward the ethno-religious war. Individuals express regrets. No well-publicized action except the visit of an ecumenical team in 1990 under the leadership of Rabbi Arthur Schneier and Father Leonid Kishkovsky (both members of OPREE's Advisory Editorial Board) have taken place. A hateful mass psychosis is hardly a situation for quiet diplomatic intervention by church leaders, should anyone wish to delude themselves with this alternative. Only highly visible pressure by such figures as the pope and the heads of churches or the World Council of Churches might work.

The situation is crying out for religious and statesman-like mediation. Arbitration by such respected and experienced personalities as former U.S. president Jimmy Carter might enhance the non-violent alternatives. Visits of well-known religious leaders (with advisors who know the situation intimately) from abroad who would initiate contacts with


religious leaders in the country and keep persuading them to rise to their religious obligation in their contacts with the populace could do good. Clearly any solution is preferable to the massive blood-shed of a war of nationalities that would likely spread over the rest of southeastern Europe. Why are there no clear religious expressions of concern? Are we waiting for another genocide on the Balkans?