

# QUESTIONS

## FOCUS ON THE Balkans

*In the early 1990s, the world watched at first uneasily, then with increasing concern, and finally in horror as the country once known as Yugoslavia went to war with itself. Atrocity was accepted as necessary: Neighbor slaughtered neighbor in the name of "ethnic cleansing" and rape was used as a so-called "instrument of national policy." In ironic complement to war, Olympic sites near the Bosnian city of Sarajevo that became famous during the Winter Games of 1984 were turned into strongholds for artillery and infantry and, in turn, themselves became the targets of shells and bombs.*

*For the moment, the fighting appears to be over. An uneasy peace holds under the terms of the Dayton Peace Accords, policed by occupying troops, including Americans. But some of the peacekeepers may leave this summer. What will — what should — happen then?*

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*Photos by Todd Spencer*



*People have thought of Yugoslavia as the exemplar of what was wrong with the Soviet Union's idea of empire — how fundamental divisions ignored can eventually rend a country apart.*

It's a good example of ancient hatreds that are refreshed every generation with more blood being spilled. It's a perfect example of how people's emotions can get the better of them. Yugoslavia was a country that worked, as an entity brought together under one umbrella without ethnic considerations being a major factor. [Yugoslav dictator Marshal] Tito indeed had a cardinal rule: that ethnic affairs were not to be brought into the open. And the country prospered.

As soon as he died, the nationalists were able to use the cause of nationalism to remind people of why they didn't like the person they'd been getting along with fine for the past 40 years. Unscrupulous politicians were able to take advantage of those nationalist feelings and convince people that it made more sense to follow nationalism than to follow their economic self-interest.

There's no reason why Yugoslavia shouldn't still be together. Those folks worked together. They were able to suppress their differences. While you had a national leader that made that his goal, it worked.

*Why is it that their ethnic hatreds are so intense?*

It's odd. These are people that have a great deal in common. It's as though to forget what they have in common they focus on the few things that divide them. It's almost a willful attempt to find out what's different.

More importantly, they have the experience of the Second World War, in which one side was really

pitted against the other. The Croats committed atrocities against the Serbs, and the Serbs have long memories. Those antagonisms are rekindled with every new generation.

*Can you provide a brief guide to this complex social/political/cultural mix of groups in Yugoslavia?*

Along with the less numerous Slovenes, you essentially you have two main ethnic groups: the Serbs and the Croats. The Serbs have always been the dominant ethnic group and are Eastern Orthodox Christian in religion. The Croats are Roman Catholics. They've looked to two different religious centers. The language is slightly different.

The Muslims are there because the area was once part of the Ottoman Empire from the 13<sup>th</sup> through the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and had been conquered by the Turks. Serbia was the first state in the area to achieve independence, which they did in the years before World War I. The Serbs then tried to appeal to

other Slavic peoples in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to join them, and to make all of the other ethnic groups subservient. The Serbs' reason for being has always been to create a greater Serbia, to bring all Serbs in the region into one great state.

During the Second World War, when the Nazis invaded, they took advantage of ethnic hatreds to create a Croat puppet state. The Serb resistance against the Germans did not last perhaps as long as it should have because the Germans retaliated by killing ten Serbs for every German.

Tito was able to create a resistance movement that drew on all the ethnic groups by pushing the idea of a Yugoslav entity. Tito himself was of mixed blood, part Croat and part Slovenian. So he tried to appeal to the people to come together in a federation, to try to sell the idea that they'd be more prosperous if they came together as one. And of course he had another ideology that he put on top of this — communism, or socialism as he would call it.

It's an old, old division between peoples whose heritage is different, who can cooperate but who have not been able to for sustained periods of time.

*Is the role of religion more important than the ethnic hatreds?*

I discount all of the religious differences. This business about the Bosnians being Muslims — it was all just a cover for those who wanted to take their territory. What's going on is that Serbia and Croatia have always wanted to control Bosnia-Herzegovina for many, many, many years. When the Yugoslav state fell apart in 1991, both Serbia and Croatia simply followed the same path they've been following for a very long time: to get their hands on that area. The fact that some of the Bosnians were Muslim, I think, enabled each side to inject a religious element where there shouldn't have been one.

... Sarajevo was a wonderful, beautiful city. It was a city of a lot of ethnic groups working together. The tragedy is that the leaders were able to generate enough hatred to tear it all apart.

*Why has this conflict been so bloody?*

There are a lot of grievances the leaders were able to hit on to cause all the turmoil ... If you put into the mix other issues — economic deprivation, for example, is a primary one — people are responsive to the man on horseback who claims that he has the answer.

Look at the United States. A lot of people still display the flag that was the symbol of the Confederacy. If asked if they are American they say yes, of course they are. But if you make some disparaging comment about an ancestor who fought on the

Southern side in the Civil War, that gets their dander up. It's that same kind of thing: family connections and family grievances that people remember.

These folks talk about World War II as if it were yesterday. I would be at conferences in the 1980s, and the academics would lean over to me and whisper as somebody was giving a paper, "You know, he's really a Croat." I'd say, "What!?"

One of the arguments made is that Tito, in suppressing these ethnic divisions in the long run exacerbated them. In other words, by not dealing with them, they were allowed to fester. He creates this ideal that simply rides on top of these ethnic hatreds. As soon as the ideal disappears, what are you going to cling to? Who are you now? If Yugoslavia doesn't exist, you're back to being a Serb, you're back to being a Croat.

The problem with nationalism is that it implies an exclusiveness. It immediately identifies someone else as the other. Any appeal to nationalism can quickly become destructive. Given the right kinds of circumstances, any people are capable of this kind of horror. Who were more cultured, sophisticated and civilized than the Germans? Yet they followed a man who executed six million people.

*Where do matters stand today in the former Yugoslavia?*

Yugoslavia consists now of Serbia and Montenegro. Croatia is independent and Bosnia is occupied. The United

States is there to stay, I think, for a very long time ... I don't think peace will come to the area unless it's enforced.

*What lessons are there for Americans?*

Disturbances far away can have an impact on the United States even now that the Cold War is over.

In particular, the kind of savagery in the heart of Europe that the Yugoslav wars unleashed is something the United States shouldn't tolerate. I think what we have to do is ask ourselves what does it really mean to be the only remaining super-power. How are we going to use our power? What kind of commitments will we make? ... What is it in our interest to stop or to start?

As I explain in my book, during the Cold War, we measured everything in terms of communism and non-communism ... What yardstick do we use now? The collapse of Yugoslavia — the Third Balkan War, as some have called it — showed us these kinds of human rights violations, this kind of instability, this kind of aggression is something we need to be concerned about.

Unfortunately, there's no American consensus. My students keep asking "Why do we have to go? Why do we have to do this? Why is it our job?"

Because, I tell them, we're the only kids on the block still standing. That's why it's our job ... Only eternal vigilance by the West will prevent a Fourth Balkan War.

