Behind the news:3

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Lessons of History: War Returns to Yugoslavia

One can state the precise time when the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia came to an end: 5 a.m. on 25 June 1991—when the Federal Army launched a frontal attack on Slovenia. This action was taken without authorisation from the Yugoslav Presidency, the Army's commander-in-chief. It is inconceivable that such authorisation would have been forthcoming in any case, since the Federal constitution expressly forbids Federal troop movements in any Yugoslav republic or province without its formal consent. This provision of the constitution, moreover, merely reflects the fact that the Yugoslav Federation was structured as a union of equal and sovereign republics (with provinces having *de facto* identical rights, and *de jure* too so far as military intervention is concerned). The Army's attack was thus unconstitutional—an act of high treason, a *coup d'état.* Why did it happen?

Such a decision could not have been taken on the spur of the moment. On the contrary, it is clear that this momentous step by the Chiefs of Staff was simply the

final twist in an evolution of Yugoslav politics that had been for long heading towards disintegration. At which point in time did this fissiparous tendency first become manifest and what were its generators? 1867, the year of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, marks the point at which the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy became inevitable: after that year, the unity of the Empire was ensured only by internal repression,—and the needs of the European balance of power. The Yugoslav equivalent of 1867 came one hundred and twenty years later in 1987, when a party coup made Slobodan Milošević President of the League of Communists of Serbia—and thus undisputed leader of the largest Yugoslav republic—on a platform that was manifestly nationalist and anti-constitutional. His victory over his constitutionalist opponents in the party and their liberal allies—followed by massive purges throughout Serbia's political and state life (notably in the media), delivered the first blow to Yugoslavia's political unity, and ultimately also to its territorial integrity.

How could this come about? Why did Serbia in particular become the bastion of political reaction, and why did the other republics and provinces passively accept Milošević's drastic restructuring of the republic's internal politics despite all the evidence pointing to its disastrous ultimate outcome? For an answer one must go back in time a decade and a half, to the equally massive 1971-2 country-wide purge of reformers in the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY). All the republican parties were affected by this purge, but especially those of Serbia and Croatia. A whole generation of capable young leaders was suddenly removed from political life and replaced by older party cadres committed to the status quo. In effect, the purge—sanctioned by Tito—amounted to a Yugoslav equivalent of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia three years earlier. A new emphasis on ideological purity now went together with a re-concentration of power in the hands of Tito and his immediate circle. The effects of the purge, however, differed from one republic to another. In Croatia, where it was carried out in the name of a struggle against Croat nationalism, it led to a potentially dangerous re-drawing of the ethnic balance in favour of Serb cadres. In Serbia, where it was presented as an offensive against technocrats and liberals, the party was flooded with small-time apparatchiks (something similar is now happening in Macedonia).

Only after Tito's death, in 1980, was it possible to begin the painful—and at times seemingly hopeless—process of rebuilding the liberal-reforming current within the individual parties But by this time the cards were heavily stacked against it (except in Slovenia, where the purge had been less drastic). For one thing, the purge had produced a new pattern of relationships between the republics and provinces. The position of the southern republics, and especially Bosnia-Herzegovina, was enhanced, while Croatia's capacity for autonomous action at the Federal level was significantly reduced. Serbia emerged as the bastion of a new wave of Yugoslav unitarism, strengthening thereby its traditional ideological ally: Great Serb nationalism. Superimposed on this realignment, however, was a counter-current—symbolised by the adoption of the 1974 constitution—that was a fruit of the liberating 1960s. The 1974 constitution emphasised the statehood of the six republics, and also gave Serbia's two autonomous provinces direct representation at the Federal level. There was now, therefore, a blatant contradiction between state-political decentralisation and party-ideological recentralisation. In the

1980s—a decade of growing economic crisis—this was to produce an explosive situation.

The 1971-2 party purge had an even more dramatic consequence in the long run, in that it brought the Army to the very centre of political life, even giving it an *ex officio* place on the Federal Party presidency. Never before had a purge involved a simultaneous replacement of the political and state leaderships of the two largest and most powerful republics—Serbia and Croatia—and it had been possible to conceive and conduct it only with the help of the Army. The Army, of course, has always held a special place within Yugoslavia's political life, partly because of its Partisan origins and partly because of the country's sense of insecurity during the years of the Cold War. Unlike the Federal Ministry of the Interior, which was purged and decentralised in the mid-1960s, the Army was left untouched. It is true that in 1968 there was a possibility of it too being brought more firmly under state-civilian control. A review of Yugoslavia's defence capabilities in the wake of the invasion of Czechoslovakia revealed serious weaknesses, and led to a decision to organise Partisan-style, popular forms of self-defence. This decision gave birth to Territorial Defence (TD) forces, funded and controlled by individual republics and provinces, but linked to the Army. Arguments over the relationship between the TD and the Army soon produced a division within the military establishment similar to that in the party at large, with liberally-minded generals wanting greater independence for the TD while conservatives complained that this would produce republican armies and encourage separatism. But the 1971-2 purge of the reformers within the party, conducted with the Army's backing, tilted the balance firmly in favour of the military hardliners. Thereafter, the autonomy of the Army from civilian institutions grew during the last few years of Tito's life, and strengthened considerably after his death. Many generals, on retirement, sought for themselves a civilian role within the Federal and republican party leaderships.

For all these reasons, Tito's death represented a turning point in the life of the country. As head of state and commander-in-chief of the Army, he was replaced by an eight-man collective presidency, made up of representatives of the republics and provinces. The party presidency was similarly constituted, with the difference that here the Army contributed a ninth member. Both these bodies operated formally on a consensual basis. After a few years, however, the suppressed contradictions of the previous decade came to the fore. A struggle between hardliners and liberals opened up on several fronts. In this struggle, Great Serb nationalism was from the outset to find itself firmly aligned with Stalinist hardliners.

The first front was opened up in Kosovo, where large-scale demonstrations in March-April 1981 were suppressed by military intervention, leading to considerable loss of life and the imposition of a state of emergency in the province—the first time such a measure had been applied in any part of Yugoslavia since World War II. Not only the province's Albanian leaders of the day, but also independent intellectuals since then, have argued that the demonstrations got out of hand thanks to agents provocateurs planted by the Serbian police—a thesis that acquires plausibility in the light of subsequent events. For the Kosovo demonstrations allowed a re-opening of the whole question of this overwhelming Albanian province's status within Serbia, uniting nationalists inside and outside the Serbian party on a platform of reintegrating

both provinces into Serbia and reducing Albanian national rights. The result of this was a growing campaign for revision of the Serbian constitution, which soon acquired a strident anti-Albanian tone. The leaders of Vojvodina too, and anybody else supporting the position that Kosovo and Vojvodina should remain autonomous, were denounced as corrupt bureaucrats putting their office before the sacred cause of national unity.

The second front was opened up on the issue of Federalism, as defined by the 1974 constitution. Great Serb nationalists and Yugoslav unitarists alike argued that the constitution had destroyed the unity of the country as a whole, and of Serbia in particular, by giving too many powers to the republics and provinces. This first push towards a recentralisation of Yugoslavia came in the mid-1980s and took an 'educational' form. Its main thrust was that, in order to strengthen the country's unity, control over school curricula should be given to the Federation. It quickly became clear, however, that this concern for unity was little more than an attempt to Serbianise school textbooks, particularly in regard to the interpretation of history and to language. Complaints that Slovenes, Macedonians and Albanians did not know Serbo-Croat, that Croats were unnecessarily calling their language Croat, and that the Cyrillic script in Serbia was under threat of extinction, grew in volume. This educational offensive in the event came to nothing, but it did send a warning signal to all the non-Serb nationalities. A vigorous counter-attack was led by the writers' associations in the other republics and Kosovo. In Slovenia, indeed, it was this writers' revolt against the proposed educational reform which was to produce, a few years later, one of the first non-communist parties in Yugoslavia—the Slovene Democratic Alliance—which then won the 1990 elections as part of a wider coalition. (The Great Serb ideologues, however, backed by the Army, did win one victory—over a new national anthem: a 19th century Panslav song was adopted in the mid-1980s, despite strong protests from the non-Slav nationalities.)

The third front was opened up on the issue of civil liberties, especially freedom of the press and association. This was an issue on which the Army held very strong views, and the only one which caused an initial—albeit temporary—difference between it and the Serb nationalists. The initiative on this occasion came from the hardline Croatian party leadership, which in 1985 published a notorious 'White Book', listing several hundred intellectuals from all over Yugoslavia as counter-revolutionaries of different hues. Also in 1985, six Belgrade intellectuals were arrested and charged with counter-revolutionary activity. This anti-democratic offensive, however, turned out to be counter-productive, given the West's increased emphasis at the time on human rights in Eastern Europe, —and Yugoslavia's growing dependence on Western aid. It became even more untenable with Gorbachev's arrival in the Kremlin. The White Book was accordingly set aside, and only one of the Belgrade Six was imprisoned for a relatively short time. It was precisely at this point that Slovenia emerged as the vanguard of democratic change in Yugoslavia, involving both active and tacit cooperation between spontaneous grass-root 'alternative' politics and culture, the official youth organisation, and the reforming wing inside the Slovenian party (strengthened by Milan Kučan's election as the Slovene party president). In Croatia too, the hardline wing associated with Stipe Šuvar—a man close to the Army and the instigator of the 'White Book'—lost out to a more moderate grouping inside the party.

A fourth, and as it turned out decisive, front was opened up in Serbia, where in 1987 key Serbian generals backed Slobodan Milošević in his bid for power. The hardliners' coup inside the Serbian party was quickly consolidated using state-sponsored nationalism. Hundreds of meetings were organised throughout Serbia, demanding removal of the provinces' autonomous status, the re-centralisation of Serbia, and the recentralisation of Yugoslavia. These meetings—reminiscent of China's Cultural Revolution and dubbed the 'anti-bureaucratic revolution'—also demanded the resignation of all liberal politicians throughout the country. The 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (in which Ottoman armies had scored a decisive victory over the remnants of a short-lived Serbian empire) was used to issue a call to all Serbs to close ranks behind Milošević. A march through the institutions by all means necessary to create a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia was also announced. The Vojvodina and

The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (prior to 25 June 1991)

Kosovo governments were toppled by carefully orchestrated mass mobilisations. The rest of Yugoslavia watched in silence these first acts of destruction of the Federal order, in the mistaken belief that Milošević's blitzkrieg would end at the borders of Serbia. But then Bosnia-Herzegovina too was severely destabilised, by means of an all-too-convenient allegation of corruption involving its Muslim leaders. A successful coup was subsequently organised in Montenegro, which brought down its government and replaced it with one loyal to Milošević. Party and state administrations in the provinces and Montenegro were purged and filled with men loyal to Milošević. In Kosovo the resistance was fierce, involving several mass demonstrations and two general strikes, but eventually the province was subjugated by the Army.

These changes completely altered the national and political balance in Yugoslavia. Milošević and his military backers could now count on four out of eight votes on the Presidency, which commanded the Army. Serbia looked poised to win control over the whole country. The political war now extended to new fronts, with Serbia and the Army effecting a division of labour. In Croatia, Serbia raised the issue of the Serb minority (just as it had done earlier in Kosovo), alleging that it was being mistreated and demanding intervention by the Federal party and state. It began to organise mass rallies in Croatian areas populated by Serbs, at which Croatian party leaders were roundly denounced as anti-Serb and anti-Yugoslav. In Slovenia (where there is no settled Serb population), meanwhile, the Army exerted tremendous pressure on the party leadership to muzzle the increasingly free press, threatening direct intervention if it were not obeyed. In 1988 the Army arrested five journalists working for the Slovene youth paper *Mladina* and an Army sergeant, accusing them of stealing military secrets (this had more than a whiff of personal vengeance about it, since *Mladina* had spearheaded criticism of the Yugoslav Army and revealed corruption involving some powerful generals). As all this was going on, Serbia called for an extraordinary congress of the LCY, at which a new centralising party constitution was to be adopted.

It is now becoming increasingly clear (through interviews recently published by high-ranking Slovene and Croat generals, and backed by documentation) that the Army Chiefs of Staff were already preparing a military takeover, for which Serbia—where all Federal institutions are located—would be used as a safe house. It seems the Army was convinced it could win by primarily political means, backed up by a token show of force. It seems also that the West, fearing Yugoslavia's break-up, was inclined to back the generals provided that some sort of civilian facade could be preserved (the powerless Federal government, headed by Ante Marković, was an obvious candidate to play this role). The link with Milošević's Serbia thus worked to the Army's advantage. However, at a more fundamental level, it has turned out also to be its undoing. For the rise of Serb nationalism, and Serbia's quest for hegemony in Yugoslavia, could not fail to provoke a strong sense of fear among the non-Serb nationalities who comprise two-thirds of the country's population. Macedonia, which had formerly tended to ally itself with Serbia on the Albanian question, now became increasingly restive. So too did Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite sympathies for Milošević among the Serb third of its population. In Slovenia, new political parties made their appearance and the assembly began legislative preparations for multi-party elections. In Croatia, the party

came under strong popular pressure to stand up to Serbia and the Army; here too new political parties started to be formed and, fearing an imminent 'fraternal' intervention, the Croatian party (headed coincidentally at the time by a Serb president) opted likewise in December 1989 for multi-party elections. By now, of course, Communist regimes were being swept aside in much of Eastern Europe. Croatia's decision to hold multi-party elections at the same time as Slovenia (April 1990) meant that the conservative alliance had lost the political war and the process of democratic change in Yugoslavia as a whole would now be unstoppable. The all-Yugoslav party congress, held in late February 1990, proved to be the last. By the end of 1990, multi-party elections had been held throughout Yugoslavia—with the exception of Kosovo. Only in Serbia and Montenegro was the Communist party (under a new name) returned to power.

Preparation by the Army and Serbia for an outright war took several forms. In Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and partially also Slovenia, TD forces were disarmed. In Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serb municipalities were armed. In both republics, but especially in Croatia, majority Serb areas were encouraged to declare themselves independent from the central republican authorities. In the armed forces, unreliable officers holding important posts—especially those of Slovene and Croat origin—were retired and replaced by Serb officers. In their preparations for war, the Chiefs of Staff also re-organised military regions in such a way as to minimise local republican or civilian influence. New corps, under the direct command of the Ministry of Defence, were installed in certain sensitive areas such as the Croatian city of Knin—a centre of what, in August 1990, was to become the 'Autonomous Region of Krajina'. In the course of 1991, such Krajinas were formed also in eastern Croatia, as well as in northern and southern Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the first half of 1991, several attempts were made to bring down the new government in Croatia and/or place Yugoslavia as a whole under military rule. The Autonomous Region of Krajina, and then other Serb-inhabited parts of Croatia, were encouraged to wage an open armed struggle against the Croatian government. All attempts by the new governments in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia to negotiate a looser form of Yugoslav association—a confederation of sovereign states of the kind recently agreed in the Soviet Union—were firmly rebuffed, leading Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia increasingly towards independence. Under the impact of such developments, the Federal institutions—the Presidency, the Government and the Assembly—became marginalised and were rendered impotent.

When, in late June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia formally declared their independence (as they had announced six months earlier that they would, if no political agreement could be reached), the Army responded by an outright attack on Slovenia. It is as yet uncertain whether this attack was intended to keep Slovenia in Yugoslavia, or to drive it out altogether. What is certain is that the Army's defeat in Slovenia quickly led to an open change of course, in that the Chiefs of Staff no longer made any pretence of seeking to hold Yugoslavia together. but lined up instead behind the project of Greater Serbia. As I write these lines, Croatian territory is being parcellised by an intensive attack of combined Serbian and Army forces, intent on drawing up new borders that would force much of the present Yugoslavia into a Greater Serbia (a state where Serbs would still be a minority, and which could be held together only by

force). The Army is turning Bosnia-Herzegovina into a bastion of its armed might, despite the evident resistance of its Muslim and Croat populations. Macedonia in the south has in the meantime declared itself an independent state, Kosovo is on the verge of open rebellion, as is the Muslim population of the historic Sandjak province divided between Serbia and Montenegro. Having destroyed the first Yugoslavia, Great Serb nationalism has finally managed to destroy the second Yugoslavia as well.

If one looks for the lessons of history, then the following seem to hold for Yugoslavia. 1) Yugoslavia as a state is not viable unless it grants equal rights to all its national groups. 2) Centralism in Yugoslavia has always ended in Serbian domination of the state, which means that unitarism embedded in the apparatus of the central state feeds off and encourages Great Serb nationalism. 3) Great Serb aspirations come to the fore when democracy is suppressed in Serbia, which means that a democratic Serbia is a precondition for any kind of Yugoslavia. 4) Serb nationalism, like all others in Yugoslavia, grows as a result of uneven economic development.

This last 'lesson' has not been covered in this article, yet there is little doubt that uneven economic development has been the main motor of Yugoslavia's political disintegration. Throughout the country's history, Serbia has tried to compensate for its relative economic weakness by attempts (usually successful) to dominate the central state apparatus. In pre-war Yugoslavia, there were no barriers to its political domination, but Communist Yugoslavia erected the Federal structure to act as a bar to any such hegemonic aspirations. The Serbian liberal leaders purged in 1971-2 understood that any true future for Serbia must lie not in attempts to dominate others, but in acquiring the ability to tackle the problems of its own development in cooperation with others. The sovereignty of the other republics, as well as the national affirmation of the Albanian population within Yugoslavia, were seen by them to be also preconditions for a democratic constitution of Serbia itself, without which Serbia could not properly attend to its own problem of transition from an agrarian to an industrial and modern society. Serbia was not itself responsible for the purge of that generation of capable political leaders. They were sacrificed on the altar of a false all-Yugoslav party unity, i.e. the maintenance of an undemocratic system of government. A tragic outcome was thus built into the core of the Yugoslav revolution of 1941-5—in the Stalinist formation and mentality of the party which organised and led it—producing ultimately not only the war-devastated Croatia of today, but also a Serbia gripped by the ruthless tyranny of destructive nationalism. The Serb nation is today feared and disliked by its neighbours, yet the past tells of its ability to speak the language of freedom and national tolerance. As recently as March 1991, hundreds of thousands of young Serbian men and women came out onto the streets to express their aspirations for democracy and their abhorrence of the Milošević regime, only for their protests to be sidetracked by equally nationalist opposition politicians. Peace in the Balkans will return when Serbia recovers its democratic and socialist tradition.