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The Balkans' Lethal Nationalisms

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THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE KOSOVO WAR

THE WAR in Kosovo has reinforced the Balkans' image as a cauldron of ethnic hatred. Many commentators argue that the region has always been wracked by ancient hatreds. Others argue that today's strains are artificial, manufactured by cynical postcommunist demagogues looking to legitimate their rule. Neither school has it right. Balkan ethnic strains are neither as ancient as time nor as recent as the rise to power of Slobodan Milošević; rather, they are about as old as the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nationalism. To a historian, today's Balkan crises are rooted in, above all, the crippling dependence of all Balkan peoples on the ideology and psychology of expansionist nationalism. With the West now drawn deeper than ever into the struggle between Serbs and Albanians, we must better understand the roots of their passions.

Today's tensions are the result of the region's absorption into the Ottoman Empire, which led to the extraordinary dispersion and intermixture of ethnic groups in Balkan and Danubian Europe. Premodern state-formation in the Balkans was short-circuited by the Ottoman Turkish conquest of the region during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. As elsewhere in the world—India and imperial Russia are good examples—empire went hand in hand with great ethnic-cultural diversity and, at the local level, political autonomy. Under the Ottomans, the subject populations were organized above

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all by religion. Such a schema did not require that the adherents of any particular faith live in any compact area. From the viewpoint both of the Ottoman Empire and the various religious hierarchies, personal identity was, so to speak, extraterritorial. In some cases, as with the Serbian Orthodox Church, religion fostered national cultural identity. But religion also fractured groups speaking the same language, like the Albanians—some three-quarters of whom until 1945 were Muslims, either of the Sunni or Bektashi orientation, while the remainder were followers of Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism (as exemplified by the late Mother Teresa). Similarly, Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosnians, and Orthodox Serbs all speak the same language but are deeply divided by religion and political history.

As the Ottoman Empire began to break down in the eighteenth century, the ideology of European nationalism penetrated the Balkans in support of the Balkan Christians' claim to liberation from increasingly oppressive Turkish rule. Eager for territorial gains or Balkan Christian clients, some European great powers, notably Russia, became patrons of this process. Others, such as Great Britain, lost faith in the ability of the "sick man of Europe" to go on living and resigned themselves to the empire's partition. Thus the foundations of independent national states were laid in Serbia in 1815, in Greece in 1830, in Romania in 1856, in Bulgaria in 1878, and in Albania in 1913. In each case, the liberated state territory contained various minorities besides the new ruling nationality. The new states were all also mere fragments of the ideal territorial nations in the minds of the new nationalist elites. These ideal nations—Greater Serbia, Greater Albania, Greater Greece, and the like—encompassed outlying regions populated by still more national minorities and coveted as well by one or more neighboring states.

In other words, the Balkan states were all born in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as irredentist nations—that is, as nations committed to the recovery of their "unredeemed" national territories. Their legitimacy rested entirely on their ability to embody the national "imagined community."

Moreover, these societies (except for parts of Romania and Croatia where local aristocracies survived) were extraordinarily populist by west European standards. Ottoman rule had stripped them of their

medieval dynasties and nobilities. The Ottoman collapse brought down those few groups that had prospered through collaboration with the Turks. The newly liberated Balkan lands were peasant societies with only very modest commercial and manufacturing elites and nationalist intelligentsias. The intellectuals devoted themselves to state-building, advancing themselves as best they could within what might, with apologies to Marx, be called the nationalist mode of production—that is, getting richer and accumulating status by serving the burgeoning national state. Capitalist individualism possessed little prestige or legitimacy; state-building in order to field armies capable of wresting away the unredeemed lands of the nation from their enemy possessors was the highest public value. The Balkans were hardly unique in this respect; there are many parallels with other parts of the non-Western world, notably postcolonial Latin America and parts of Africa.

If there was democracy in this, it was an oligarchically controlled populist democracy that worked for the ruling nationality alone. And it coexisted with powerful kinship networks and patron-client relationships, both of which had been vital to the social survival of non-Muslims and Muslims alike under Ottoman rule.

National minorities faced unenviable dilemmas. Muslim minorities could rarely claim effective citizenship in a Balkan Christian national state since they were associated with the execrated and, in most cases, now expelled Turks. But even Christian minorities could hope for toleration only if they confined their demands to linguistic and religious rights while agreeing to learn the now-dominant majority language and loyally serve the state in which they lived. To ask anything more risked the charge of hostility to their new fatherland.

THE PRISON-HOUSE OF NATIONS

TODAY'S BALKAN states, then, possess next to nothing of the Western liberal tradition, with its emphasis on individualism and protection for dissenters and minorities. The Balkan countries emerged from centuries of Ottoman rule with little more than a desperately wished-for national identity. Even their religious sensibilities had been nationalized, by the actions of both their own intellectuals and the Ottoman regime.

The interwar advance toward liberal democracy under Wilsonian auspices was weak. True, in the 1920s, before they fell under right-wing dictatorships, the independent Balkan states developed multiparty political systems in which broad-based peasant parties urged land reform and other anti-oligarchic measures. But these parties were also strongly nationalist, as were the right-wing authoritarian monarchies and protofascist regimes that eclipsed them in the 1930s. There was little by way of liberalism to resist the rise of rightist dictatorship.

> In the eyes of Tito's foes, protecting Albanian Kosovars and Muslim Bosnians was a sin.

Likewise, post–World War II Balkan communism was deeply nationalist in nature, despite its internationalist phraseology. The communist regimes were, in effect, populist development dictatorships justified in terms of the unity of the nation and its right and need to catch up with the developed capitalist world. Even in capitalist Greece, the communist and socialist movements have been profoundly nationalistic. Tito's Yugoslavia was legitimized through and through by nationalism, especially after the dramatic Tito-Stalin split of 1948. Tito aimed to satisfy each Yugoslav nationality's basic collective claims while at the same time balancing them against each other to keep his own position of charismatic authority impregnable and ensure that no one national group overwhelmed the others. Thus in 1966 he broke the power of his heir apparent, the Serb Alexander Ranković, for accumulating excessive power within the Serbian component of the Yugoslav federation.

It is sometimes said that because Tito's Yugoslavia was a communist dictatorship, it prevented the emergence of a dissident movement striving to create a liberal, individualistic civil society. Instead, the anti-communist movement was supposedly forced to clothe itself in the garb of separatist nationalism. But this is Western liberal wishful thinking. Exclusivist nationalism triumphed in Yugoslavia because it expressed the deepest yearnings and values of most of those who were disaffected from the communist regime. Among the various sins of Tito's "prison-house of nations," in its nationalist foes' eyes, was its protection of such minorities and outsiders as the Muslim Bosnians and Albanian Kosovars.

To make matters worse, the Balkan countries have also been weak states, resting until World War II on underdeveloped agrarian economic bases. Their tax revenues were not enough to pay for large and sophisticated armies, nor for state institutions that could firmly control their own societies. The sporadic wars the Balkan states fought bled them white. Until 1914 their rulers lived in fear of antitax revolts in the countryside. In 1907 quelling a peasant revolt in Romania cost a hundred thousand lives. The Balkan states fell into heavy foreign debt. As their economic dependency on the capitalist or communist poles grew, they fell as well into great-power clientage.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

THE CONCEPTION of an ideal Greater Serbia dates to the 1840s. It gave the independent state of Serbia the agenda to conquer and incorporate Serb-inhabited lands in Bosnia, in Ottoman-held southern Serbia stretching into Macedonia, in the Vojvodina and Banat districts in southern Hungary, in the Krajina district in Croatia, in Serb-speaking (if historically independent) Montenegro, and in Kosovo, cradle of the medieval Serbian monarchy. The notion of a southern Slavic federation—that is, the nineteenth-century Yugoslav idea—appealed very little to Serbian nationalists. Nor was it essential to their national liberation, as it was for the Croatians and Slovenes living under Hapsburg Austrian rule.

Although Serbia had dominated interwar Yugoslavia, in Tito's state, Serbian nationalists resented their reduced influence. Serbian bitterness at the loss of hegemony persisted from the time of Rankovič's fall until the collapse of the federation in 1992. Serbian dissident nationalists began criticizing communist Yugoslavia after Tito's death in 1980, focusing on the Serb decline in Kosovo, where Serbs were now overwhelmingly outnumbered by Albanians. Slobodan Milošević, a communist politician, embraced this theme in a now-notorious 1989 speech, redefining himself and the Serbian state he led in Serbian nationalist terms.

The Serb position in Kosovo had been permanently undermined by the failure of a 1689 Serb rebellion against Ottoman rule. The Ottomans had been temporarily weakened by a great 1683 defeat at

The BALKANS in the Mid-Eighteenth CENTURY

Map by Ib Ohlsson for FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hapsburg and Polish hands but were still capable of dominating the Serbian lands. Fearing murderous reprisals, the Serbian archbishop of Peć led some 30,000 Serbian families into exile in Hapsburg-ruled southern Hungary, where their descendants live to this day. Henceforth the Albanians in Kosova (as the region is known in their language), favored by the Ottomans as loyal Muslims, rose to demographic predominance. Two centuries later, when the great Eastern Crisis of 1875–78 partially dismantled the Ottoman Empire, the miniature Serbian state sought to seize Kosovo but ran headlong into nascent Albanian nationalism there. The result was severe bloodshed.

In the Balkan War of 1912, Serbia succeeded in conquering and annexing Kosovo, whereupon it promptly attacked and expelled the Ottoman Turkish elites along with many Muslim Albanians. Slavic

Christians (mostly Serbs and Montenegrins) perpetrated terrible massacres of Muslim Albanians, along with Turks and Slavophone Muslims, in Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia, and southern Serbia during and immediately after World War I. In the interwar decades, Kosovo was an internal colony of the Serb component of the Yugoslav state. Official policy settled numerous Serb officials, farmers, and towns-people there while seeking to "Serbianize" the Albanian majority linguistically and politically.

During World War II, Kosovo was torn away from Yugoslavia after the country fell to the Nazis. Kosovo was then joined to Albania, which had been an Italian colony since 1939. This briefly fulfilled, although under foreign tutelage, the program of Greater Albanian nationalism. After Mussolini's fall and Italy's withdrawal from the war in 1943, the Nazis occupied Albania, encouraging the Kosovars to join their fight against both the Serbs and Tito's communist Partisans. The Nazis raised an ss division among the Kosovar Muslims. Murderous attacks on the Serbs were carried out, as they were in pro-Nazi Croatia.

At World War II's end, the Kosovars fought vainly for nearly a year against their reincorporation into the Yugoslav state. They were subsequently ruled in semicolonial fashion by the Serbian communists, whose discriminatory policies caused perhaps 250,000 Albanians to emigrate from Kosovo. Violent Albanian demonstrations in 1968 persuaded Tito to grant Kosovo wide-ranging provincial autonomy, which in the subsequent 20 years the Albanians exploited to their own advantage as much as their economic weakness and dependence on Serbia allowed.

This, then, was the state of affairs against which Serb nationalists rebelled in the 1980s, inspiring Milošević in 1989 to abolish Kosovo's provincial autonomy, introduce direct rule from Belgrade, and seek to re-Serbianize the public sphere. The Kosovar Albanians reacted by forming an unofficial dissident society, complete with its own tax system, schools, and legal and police organs, governed by an ideology of nonviolent nationalist separatism embodied in the Kosovar Albanian leader, Ibrahim Rugova. Like other stateless peoples' ventures in national solidarity, this one too sometimes displayed aggressiveness to prod the local Serbs to retreat.

With the 1991–92 disintegration of Yugoslavia, capped by the secession of Slovenia and Croatia and the subsequent civil war involving

the Serb populations in Croatia and Bosnia, sentiment for political independence spread among the Yugoslav Albanians, who voted for it in the Kosovar assembly in 1991. As Kosovo's communist neighbor, Albania, collapsed in the mid-1990s, support spread there for Kosovar independence, while arms from anarchy-torn Albania were made available to the Kosovo Liberation Army.

> NATO should have expected accelerated Serbian ethnic cleansing after the air war began.

The KLA's emergence must be reckoned a misfortune for the Kosovars, however right they may have been to believe that nonviolence and passive resistance would be but weak defenses against Milošević's re-Serbianization policies. Since 1997, the presence of the KLA has enabled Milošević to justify his regime's ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, including the displacement of several hundred thousand Kosovar Albanians and the murder of many others—even prior to the recent Rambouillet peace conference, whose purpose was to stop such outrages.

At Rambouillet, the United States and its allies proposed terms threatening Milošević with loss of Serbian control over Kosovo and its 90 percent Albanian-speaking majority following a referendum to be held after three years. This amounted to asking him to accept, in return for nothing of importance, a crushing nationalist loss that would delegitimize any Serbian government that accepted it. It is hard to imagine why the U.S. government or the other NATO powers really expected Milošević to acquiesce. Nor could they have reasonably expected, once they began the air war against Yugoslavia, anything other than an accelerated Serbian campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Albanians. This was the one step Milošević could take in reaction to the NATO assault that would advance Serbian interests and his national legitimacy, whatever else might happen.

The British journalist and Balkan expert Misha Glenny has criticized the United States and its European allies for failing to grasp that the Yugoslav breakup triggered a series of civil wars in which legitimate Serbian interests were at stake. Instead, the violence that has attended the collapse of Yugoslavia has been widely attributed in the West to Greater Serbian nationalism, embodied in Hitlerian excess by Milošević

and his Serbian partners. Had NATO acceptance of Croatian secession in 1991 been conditioned on firm guarantees for the Serb minority there, a better outcome might have occurred not only in Croatia, from which the Croats brutally expelled 200,000 or more Krajina Serbs in 1995, but also in Bosnia. Internationally mediated negotiations in 1991–92 to secure the rights of the Serbian minorities in Croatia and Bosnia would have presented an opportunity to pressure Milošević for a quid pro quo guarantee of the minority rights of the Kosovo Albanians, including self-government. In this way, the present tragedy in Kosovo might have been averted.

WHEN THE WAR WAS OVER

THE OTHER Balkan nationalisms in play in the lands of former Yugoslavia are not intrinsically morally superior to Serbian nationalism. The Slovenians, who in the past were locked in bitter nationalist conflicts with both the Italians and the Austrian Germans, today have a state that fortunately has neither irredentist claims against its neighbors nor internal minorities. Croatian, Albanian, and Bosnian Muslim nationalism are no less prey to the temptations of violence and authoritarianism than is Serbian nationalism. Croatia has proven this conclusively, most bloodily by deporting the Krajina Serbs, while KLA extremism has tarnished the Kosovar Albanians' reputation, as did adherence to Mussolini and the Nazis for an earlier generation.

Altogether, the Albanians have faced extraordinary difficulties in attaining a sense of modern nationhood, as is shown, among other things, by the profoundly paranoid and repressive character of communist Albania after World War II. The Kosovar Albanians differ markedly from their linguistic kin in Albania proper, as do the numerous Albanians in Macedonia. The Albanians have no Balkan allies. Greece is inclined to be hostile because of border disputes in Epirus and Greece's interest in an alliance with Serbia to counterbalance Bulgaria and independent, multiethnic Macedonia. Long-standing Albanian sympathies for the Turks were alienated by late Ottoman repression, though today the Turks are making some tentative pro-Albanian moves that may be harbingers of a future rapprochement.

The Albanians' only support, it seems, is NATO. If the alliance succeeds in returning the expelled Kosovars to their homes and in crippling or even toppling Milošević, it will create a crisis about which few responsible Western officials are currently speaking. This will result from the forcible defeat of Serbian nationalism, which sees the effort to retain and re-Serbianize Kosovo as entirely legitimate. This will leave a huge authority and legitimacy deficit in the Serbian lands. Something similar might prove true in Montenegro, whose pro-Western government may not survive the affront to pro-Serbian feelings provoked by the bombing campaign, which has not spared Montenegrin targets. How will NATO fill this vacuum? How will Washington and its allies help a liberal, pro-Western Serbian political culture emerge after the war?

The analogy that comes to mind is occupied Germany after 1945. But there German political culture could draw on an authentic tradition of moderate liberalism and cosmopolitanism, as embodied in Konrad Adenauer. Even so, U.S. policy in West Germany, successful though it was, required several decades and many hundreds of millions of dollars. Will NATO make such an investment in a defeated Serbia? What incentives can NATO offer to bring forth Serbian political elites who will move the country beyond the xenophobic and collectivist nationalism that has defined the country's political culture since Napoleon's day?

Similarly, who can guarantee that a self-governing Kosovo will honor liberal democratic values? How do we propose to encourage Albanians, in both Kosovo and Albania, to advance themselves beyond collectivist nationalism? Who will guarantee the Slavic majority in Macedonia that Albanian irredentism—radiating from Priština, Tirana, or both—will not destabilize their feeble but strategically important country? Would such Albanian aggressiveness tempt the Greeks to move against Macedonia? Or the Bulgarians? Might the Greeks and Bulgarians go to war again over control of Macedonia, as they did in 1913?

BARBARIANS AT THE GATES

FINALLY, a few words about violence and cruelty. Although journalists like Robert D. Kaplan tend to "essentialize" Balkan violence—that is, to treat it as inherent in Balkan cultures—it is postmodern orthodoxy in the academy to insist that it is "socially constructed." Neither

perspective is very enlightening. State-imposed violence is quite different from the violent actions of individuals, whether acting on state orders or on their own initiative. Under the Ottoman Empire, kinship-based blood feuds of the type common to medieval western Europe survived well into the twentieth century. They did so because the Turks did not efficiently provide security and justice to their subjects after the sixteenth-century Ottoman golden age, while the authorities they sanctioned among the non-Muslims usually lacked the means to do so. Largely though not entirely suppressed after 1918, the ethic of blood revenge, binding individual members of extended families, sprang back to life when states disintegrated and civil wars erupted.

> The Balkan ethic of blood revenge has been grafted onto ethnic nationalism.

In many cases, this ethic has been successfully grafted onto ethnic nationalism. The individual murders customary to blood feuds are committed against the anonymous national enemy. This helps us understand how such people as Milošević's security police in Kosovo can murder and deport civilians of all ages. It also helps explain violence against women. In the postcommunist Yugoslavian civil wars, rape's age-old dishonoring effects have been heightened by perpetrators bent on implanting their own ethnic offspring in the wombs of the national enemy's women—an "essentialization" of national identity if there ever was one.

Under the circumstances of civil war and ethnic cleansing, the most ruthless rise to the fore; the less ruthless—who cannot escape the situation by, for example, emigrating to the U.S. eastern seaboard, where hundreds of thousands of Serb and other Balkan refugees unwilling to participate in the slaughter have congregated—are forced to toe the line. Something similar occurs in U.S. prisons, organized as they usually are along ethnic lines that pit gangs of black, Latino, and white racists against one another, leaving little or no room for dissenters.

At the level of state-imposed violence, attacks upon the enemy's human numbers—such as the expulsion of the Kosovo Albanians and the murder of many Kosovar Albanian men capable of bearing arms—have a long history in the Balkans, stretching all the way back to Thucydides' Greece. Evident here is the military and technological

weakness of the Balkan state, which, in Machiavellian manner, counsels destroying the enemy's manpower in lieu of his industries or arms as the best way of crippling his capacity to fight back. This can be grimly effective. At the same time, ethnic cleansing may succeed, as Milošević seems to hope, in establishing an irreversible fait accompli in Kosovo.

Still, the violence in both the 1992–95 wars in Croatia and Bosnia and the 1999 war in Kosovo expresses not unmediated ancient hatreds but the insecurities accompanying the breakup of the multinational communist confederation of Yugoslavia and the unresolved conflicts over the establishment of new political boundaries. In short, civil war sparked by conflicts over the frontiers of the successor states has triggered the violence and inhumanity. Had those wars been fought more impersonally, in the high-tech American way, the U.S. reaction would perhaps have been less horrified. The United States' fearsome bombing of German and Japanese cities in World War II was far more destructive of civilian life than anything that has occurred in postcommunist Yugoslavia.

Analogies are frequently drawn between Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and the Nazi genocide against the Jews. In some particulars—such as the victims' brutal uprooting from their homes at gunpoint and their inhuman transportation by railroad—the analogy, though inexact, is enlightening. But fundamentally, it is misleading. The Holocaust was a program of biological extermination based on racist eugenic theories. Balkan ethnic cleansing does not require mass extermination but rather mass removal, which can be hastened along by displays of murderous violence drawn from the repertory of revenge killings and blood feuds. This has, unfortunately, frequently occurred in the last century—for example, the destruction and expulsion of the Greeks by the Turks in Asia Minor following the ill-fated Greek invasion of Turkey in 1922. Even the lamentable Armenian genocide of 1915 was an extreme form of ethnic cleansing, not an attempt to rid the earth of every last Armenian. In 1914–15 czarist Russia forced the mass exodus of its German-speaking subjects who lived along its borders with Austria-Hungary. The largest such expulsion was that of the Germans from eastern and Balkan Europe following the Nazi defeat of May 1945. Here some 12–15 million people were uprooted and driven from their homes amid rape and murder.

These points suggest that Milošević falls short of Hitler. Although his and his allies' complicity in war crimes justifies their moral and legal condemnation, diabolizing them serves no good strategic purpose. The West is dealing with ruthless nationalists who seek secure and (to them) honorable borders—a goal understood and shared by all Balkan peoples. NATO destruction of the Serbian polity will not satisfy the Serbs' justifiable grievances, nor will it stabilize the Balkans. It will instead either force a NATO occupation of Serbia or reduce Serbia to a desperate rogue state that will leave the Balkans in permanent insecurity and fear. Since blockades and embargoes leak, containment of such a rogue would be difficult. Moreover, a defeated Serbia seething with nationalist extremism would cast shadows on neighboring states struggling toward democracy.

What should now be done? Every effort should be made, whether by further military action or by halting the bombing, to get Serbia to agree to the return of the Albanian Kosovars to their homeland. Milošević will have to agree to the presence in Kosovo of a NATO or other international police force. To gain his assent, something will have to be offered to him that he and the Serbs value, whether it is guarantees for Serbian interests in Kosovo, compensation to Serbs expelled from Croatia in 1995, or other economic concessions. The only way to remove Milošević from power is to achieve a peace within which liberal, democratic civil-society movements can sink deeper roots than they now have. It may take a long time for such an opposition to become a majority in Serbia, as it will in Croatia and other postcommunist Balkan regimes. But it is vital to the region that they do.

Meanwhile, Washington should take every care neither to impose the peace of the graveyard on Serbia nor to turn its back on a million or two Albanian Kosovar deportees. NATO—which does not mean the United States alone—has now intervened deeply enough to commit itself to the long-term stabilization and pacification of the Balkans. Anything less fails to justify the West's resort to arms.✪