

WOODROW WILSON'S DEFEAT IN YUGOSLAVIA: THE END OF A MULTICULTURAL UTOPIA

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Es sollte zugleich die Ansicht wachsen, dass ein dritter Weltkrieg, wenn auch nicht unwahrscheinlich, so doch nicht unvermeidlich ist.

—Ernst Jünger, *Über die Linie*, 1950

The violent breakup of Yugoslavia illustrates the growing difficulty of theorizing about the future of multi-ethnic states. Who would have predicted that Yugoslavia, which until recently had been hailed as a “model multi-ethnic socialist state,” would come to an end, only seventy-three years after it was created? Predictably, the much-vaunted liberal models for multi-ethnic states, such as “power sharing,” or consociationalism,” will have little attraction in an environment in which different ethnic groups can no longer live together.¹ Whether their wish for independence, even when supported by the majority of their ethnic voters, will be welcomed by multi-ethnic America or the multinational United Nations, remains to be seen. Slovenia’s, Croatia’s, and Bosnia’s self-proclaimed and bloody departure from Yugoslavia had little legally binding value, so long as they did not receive the blessing of the U.S.

¹ Arend Lijphart, “The Power-Sharing Approach,” in V. Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1990).

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The American belief that the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe would miraculously bypass the Yalta-drawn borders and bring about the "end of history," needs to be revised. To applaud the end of communism, yet to sermonize about the inviolability of European borders which were drawn in 1919 by Versailles treaty architects, and then in 1945, by their Yalta successors, does not sound very convincing. If America is ready today to adapt itself to a new post-communist reality, it follows that it should also accept a new geopolitical reality. One much not rule out the possibility that American and Atlantic fantasies about multi-ethnic and economic integration may be paralleled by a further Central and East European slide into disintegration, calling into question the security of the entire European continent.

I. YUGOSLAV CIVIL WAR OR A SERBIAN WAR OF AGGRESSION?

Since June 1991 the American administration has viewed the conflict in the former Yugoslavia as a "civil war" pitting secessionist Croatia against the Yugoslav center, Serbia. To call the war in the former Yugoslavia "civil" was quite in line with American globalist rhetoric. In the eyes of the American media, a "civil war" was taking place within the internationally recognized Yugoslav state. American geopolitical concerns also played a role. Washington was not willing to shrug off a country it had helped create in 1919, and which it provided for decades with all the necessary legitimacy and legality. Both as a Serbian-dominated monarchy, and later as Tito's communist non-aligned pseudo-federation, Yugoslavia enjoyed an excellent relationship with America. In addition, Yugoslavia was a full member of various international organizations and regimes, including the United Nations.

Also, from the sociological point of view, multi-ethnic America could not dismiss a country which in many instances was a smaller replica of the American melting pot. If Croatia is allowed to walk away, why not tomorrow allow Southern California or Arizona to merge with Mexico? From historical and demographic perspectives, nobody can prevent today's or tomorrow's Mexican Americans from invoking similar "democratic rights to self-determination."

The American view of the war in former Yugoslavia as "civil" was further justified by the fact that whenever a war breaks out in an internationally recognized state—even when a conflict involves two distinct geographic

and ethnic components within this state—it is perceived as a “civil war”. The U.N. charter explicitly forbids other foreign powers from meddling into the affairs of a country where such “inter-ethnic” conflict may take place.² It did not come as a surprise, therefore, when following the Yugo-Serbian armed aggression against Slovenia and Croatia in late June 1991, and against Bosnia in April 1992, America announced that it would provide “good offices,” declaring itself willing to be an “honest broker,” reassuring repeatedly the Croatian and Bosnian victims, as well as the Serbian aggressor, of American neutrality and impartiality.

Under pressure from America, and under pressure from their own multi-ethnic environments, Spain, England, and France copied the similar American position; that is, the Yugoslav peoples need to “talk with each other,” and their federation must somehow be preserved.³ The fact that the European Community kept inviting both Serbian and Croatian leaders to the negotiating table at the peace conference in The Hague and Brussels, only illustrates the European Community’s own fears of a similar “Balkan-esque” environment within its own house. Naturally, those conferences only gave Serbia more time and more reason to continue devouring chunks of Croatia and Bosnia. Even today, the idea that the former Yugoslav melting pot could be salvaged as a loose association of independent states, albeit under a different name, prevails in America and the E.C. Must it be recalled that for decades the French and American media portrayed Serbia (and Serb-run Yugoslavia) as a valiant ally in the First and Second World Wars?

With the Serbian invasion of Bosnia in April 1992, the war in the Balkans took a very ugly turn, and as it gradually became clear that Serbia, under the pretext of trying to salvage Yugoslavia, was paradoxically destroying it, America began to change its tune. America’s decision to swallow the definite break-up of Yugoslavia, as well as its criticism of its pivot, Serbia, was primarily motivated by the world-wide reports of Serbian atrocities, and of Serbian detention camps in Bosnia and Hercegovina.⁴

² United Nations Charter, Articles 2(4) and 2(7). See also R. J. Vincent, *Nonintervention and International Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 233–77.

³ “Yugoslavia Country Report,” published by *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, no. 3, 1991, p. 7.

⁴ “Not Quite Belsen,” *The Economist*, August 15–21 1992.

II. AMERICANISM AND YUGOSLAVIANISM: THE ENDLESS LEGALISM

In contrast to its previous active engagement in the Gulf War, the Bush Administration first took a surprisingly low-key approach to the conflict in former Yugoslavia. The U.S. pledged in July 1991 that it would cede the mediation of the Yugoslav conflict to the European Community, and that it would accept a formula negotiated and approved by the European Community. Yet all European countries continued, and still continue, to have a confusing view of the crisis in former Yugoslavia, and their approaches to solving it range from rhetorical air strikes on Serbian targets to wait-and-see tactics. Only the German government denounced the Serbian aggression—although it prudently refused to commit its own troops to the former Yugoslav republics.

Neither America nor the European Community was willing to see Germany play a stronger card in the Balkans—except, of course, when Germany pays the military cost or takes hundreds of thousands of Balkan refugees. It suffices to recall that when in 1991 the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hans D. Genscher, sounded the alarm and accused Serbia of the escalation of violence, the American government cautioned against “German unilateral moves,” arguing that such German action could ruin European Community mediation and lead to the spreading of the bloodshed to Kosovo and Macedonia. To some extent, aside from the issue of the recognition or nonrecognition of Croatia and Slovenia, the idea still prevails in Washington that the responsibility for the conflict is shared by both Serbia and Croatia, and that the only way the conflict could be resolved is through endless negotiations.

When the U.N. peace initiative, headed by the former high-ranking American official Cyrus Vance, got under way in December 1991, one had the impression that this initiative was primarily decided as the American move to block German involvement in the Balkans, rather than as a serious effort to broker a lasting cease-fire.

Other European Community members followed the American lead. On the surface their argument was that with its recognition of the new states, Germany was adding fuel to the fire and reviving the demons of 1941. The real reasons why they failed to act swiftly and together with Germany appear to be more complex. By its recognition of Croatia and Slovenia in December 1991, Germany was effectively showing that it best understood what was going on in the Balkans. Moreover, the German

attitude towards the Balkan crisis only exposed the flawed legacy, not only of Yalta, but of Versailles, too. America, France, and England must, ironically, realize today that the country they created *ex nihilo*, in 1919, and recreated *ex nihilo* in 1945, never had any legitimacy, and therefore could never function as a democracy. This time, Yugoslavia is not being destroyed by the proverbial "böser Deutsche". This time, it is the French and American darling "böses Serbien" that is mercilessly destroying the Versailles architecture and its bizarre multi-ethnic foundations.

Nobody in America is willing to countenance an assertive Germany engaging in unilateral diplomacy and acting in the area of Europe where German involvement is seen by many American politicians, let alone by the Serbian media, as an outright Fourth Reich meddling in Yugoslav affairs. Thus, on the eve of the German recognition of Croatia, American Deputy Secretary Lawrence Eagleburger issued a "stern warning" to the twelve E.C. countries not to follow Germany's example in recognizing Croatia and Slovenia.⁵

Some American commentators have suggested that America was opposed to the recognition of Croatia because officials in the Bush administration, like "Lawrence (of Serbia)" Eagleburger, and Brent Scowcroft, had extensive financial ties with Serbian communist circles in former communist Yugoslavia.⁶ In view of this possibility, it is wrong to expect America and France to speed up any invasion of "Serboslavia"—a country whose territorial "integrity and unity" America had advocated for a good part of this century.

The Bush Administration's policy towards the Balkans must be seen as neither naive nor hasty. It was a very well-planned and well-thought-out policy which refused to divorce itself from Wilsonian moralism or Bush's "new world" ecumenism. The American political indecision, rather than stopping the conflict in the Balkans, encouraged the Yugoslav Army, and its ally Serbia, to go ahead with its aggression against Bosnia. Had America, the E.C., and the U.N. very early on recognized Croatia and Bosnia, or threatened the Yugoslav Army with military strikes, or both, the conflict would probably have never escalated to its later tragic dimensions. As sovereign and internationally recognized states, Croatia and

⁵ "U.N. Fights Bonn's Embrace of Croatia," *New York Times*, December 14, 1991.

⁶ Patrick Glynn, "Yugoblunder"; and "Lawrence of Serbia," *New Republic*, February 24, 1992.

Bosnia would have not been treated as regions in an "ethnic" civil war with another region. In such a new international environment the Yugoslavia Army would have been deterred from further aggression. Instead, Serbia could interpret the E.C. disagreements, American indecision, and U.N. apoliticism to its advantage—while Croatia and Bosnia saw in it a flagrant rejection of their sovereignty and their newly won independence.

American refusal to distinguish clearly between aggressor and victim, between the "Schmittian" *hostis* and *amicus*, rather than slowing down the Serbian aggression, gave green light to future Serbian aggression. The American diplomats made a mistake twice: They clung to the idea of Yugoslavia even when it became clear that Yugoslavia could no longer be held together, and they failed to back up German diplomacy which could have best assessed the new geopolitical tremors in the Balkans and best seen the futility of keeping artificial states together by force. American and European Community blunders seem to have been prompted more by deeply flawed parallels between pre-war Germany and today's Germany, than by any genuine interest in solving the Yugoslav crisis.

III. THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL REVISITED

The war in Croatia and Bosnia, which has resulted in death and destruction on a scale unparalleled in Europe since World War II, points to the necessity of reassessing the notion of politics and sovereignty. Moreover, it requires a new definition of democracy in a multi-ethnic state. In the post-Cold War world, in a somewhat utopian fashion, the U.S. and the E.C. shrugged off the possibility of war on the European continent. When a war did break out in the former Yugoslavia, it took them months to define it, let alone stop it through resolute military action. Liberal inability to think in terms of classical power politics, and an unwillingness even to assume that Europe may be plagued by the ghost of the past, naturally led to political paralysis. America has lacked a clear vision of how to deal with a post-communist Eastern Europe. America first magnified the importance of preserving Yugoslavia; then, it urged the E.C. to solve the crisis, who with the best intentions could not bring about any cease-fire; and finally, America and the E.C. passed the torch to the apolitical U.N.

Paradoxically, the American recognition of Croatia and Slovenia signalled a European and American disengagement from the Yugoslav

crisis, precisely at the time when America and Europe should be working towards new security arrangements for all of Europe.⁷

Why did Europe and America fail to resolve the conflict quickly when it became clear, a long time ago, that Yugoslavia could no longer be held together? It appears that the long-standing neutral and aloof American attitude towards the Yugoslav crisis has complex geopolitical, economic, and historical roots.

Since Yalta both Eastern and Western Europe have played a minor role in foreign politics. "High politics" was the privileged ground of the two superpowers, with their respective policies of double containment. The Soviet Union and America contained each other, but they also contained their own respective allies and satellites. America was not just containing communism in the East; America was also containing Europe and its main pivot in the West, Germany.⁸ It should therefore come as no surprise that during the Cold War, not a single European country was willing or able to engage in "high politics." Neither France, nor Britain, let alone Germany, was in a position to create an all-out European foreign politics and handle crisis spots in Europe or elsewhere. After the end of the Cold War, after the end of bipolarity, and with the Balkan tragedy unfolding, Europe was totally unprepared for the role of a unified arbiter. Be it in the realm of creating European military security, or in developing its common politics towards crisis, Europe has always had to ask for prior American blessing. This ultimately led to European paralysis and to frequent American criticism of unilateral diplomacy, as was seen in the case of American criticism of the German recognition of Croatia. In such a "depoliticized" Europe, it did not take long to understand that European indecision in regard to the war in former Yugoslavia was only asking for a further Serbian war of aggression.

IV. THE RETURN OF HISTORY

The results of the war in the former Yugoslavia will certainly lead to an unparalleled historical revisionism regarding two world wars in Europe. Some German observers have pointed out that the Coatian fight for inde-

⁷ Jonathan Eyal, "E.C. Baptism Turns to Debacle," *The Guardian*, January 16, 1992.

⁸ Wolfram Hanrieder, *Germany, America, Europe: Forty Years of German Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

pendence indirectly challenged the legacy of Versailles and one of its crucial pillars, Serb-controlled Yugoslavia. Should Serbia lose in the Balkans, then the real winner of World War II, in a retroactive way, becomes Germany.⁹ The disappearance of Yugoslavia is already causing different geopolitical shifts in Europe, in which Germany appears as the prime winner and France, America, and Britain as losers. America must be saddened by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. For America, Yugoslavia was a model multi-ethnic state, which aside from being a buffer zone in the East-West condominium, had also had a duty to weaken the natural German *glacis* in Central and Eastern Europe. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Woodrow Wilson suffered a serious defeat in Croatia.

From the American liberal and mercantile perspective, and according to the liberal belief in economic interdependence and ethnic integration, it makes little sense to discard larger units and encourage the emergence of smaller ones, especially if this results in the disruption of world trade. The behavior of American politicians continues to be motivated by a desire to deal with unitary multi-ethnic states, especially if those states house many intertwined minorities. It is certainly no accident that America was the last country in the West to recognize the futility of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. America preferred to deal with Moscow and Belgrade's communist "reformed" leadership, rather than with individual Soviet and Yugoslav anti-communist republics. This static and reactive foreign policy may have been prompted by reasons of international security and stability, but it was also prompted by the fear of Balkanization in America. Integration through economic ties, even at the price of keeping artificial states together, appears more worthy in the West than the advocacy of self-determination, especially if the right to self-determination impedes international trade and destroys Wilsonian and President Bush's new world ecumenism. Hence American reticence to denounce and punish the Serbian aggressor. Often times, when multi-ethnic states begin to break up, a geopolitical vacuum leads to larger rifts. American fears that the example of Croatia and Bosnia could be followed tomorrow by Quebec, New Mexico, or California are not groundless at all. The 1992 riots in Los Angeles clearly illustrate that the metaphor of the Balkans and Yugoslavia can surface in America any day and at any time. The imper-

⁹ Viktor Meier, "Im Hintergrund Amerika, Die westliche Feindseligkeit gegen Kroatien und Slowenien," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 2, 1992.

ative of negotiations may be preached to Croats and Bosnians, but negotiations are resolutely rejected by Monroe's and Wilson's grandsons. In April 1992 Bush did not pontificate about sending legal advisors or Bible preachers to pacify Los Angeles rioters. He sent elite soldiers instead.

The paradox of the twentieth century is that everybody talks about unity and integration while a little farther to the East—and tomorrow in the West—massive disintegration and ruptures appear everywhere. Secessions and the resurrection of ethnic identities do not bode well for the mercantile new world order and for its main ringleader, America. Although it may be too soon to speculate about the role of the nation-state, judging by the increasing number of states in the U.N. the concept of international law and the concept of sovereignty will urgently require a new *nomos* of the earth.¹⁰

In conclusion, one may say that the U.S. and the U.N., as much as they like to talk about European unity, may also be happy to see Europe rocked by occasional wars. Would it truly be in America's interest to see a unified Europe become a superpower? Is it truly in America's interest to see Europe politically unified around its main steamroller, Germany? Hardly. Every American politician knows well that a *politically* (and not economically) united Europe would rule the world. This is the reason why European technocrats, along with their American teachers, are trying today to solve a political crisis in the Balkans with nonpolitical and apolitical means. They are attempting to use mechanisms which, while valid in apolitical America, are totally inappropriate and ineffective in a highly politicized Central and Eastern Europe. Emphasizing "negotiations" and "compromise" in the area of the world where political decision is desperately needed amounts to ignoring the essence of the political as well as the essence of the crisis in the Balkans.¹¹ The decades-long American belief that Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia, could be transformed into democratic states proved to be wrong. Yugoslavia could exist only as a Serb-dominated authoritarian or totalitarian country. "Democratic Yugoslavia" is a contradiction in terms.

Aside from the purely "Yugoslav" nature of the war in former Yugo-

¹⁰ From the liberal perspective see, Morton Halperin and David Scheffer, "What Recognition of New Nations Really Means," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 31, 1991. From an entirely different perspective, see Alain de Benoist's approach to "multi-ethnicism," "L'Idée d'Empire," in *Nation et Empire* (Paris: Acts of XXIV colloquium of the GRECE, 1991).

slavia, one can also say that this war is also a European catharsis in which Germany's *Geschichtsbewältigung* is slowly, but definitely, coming to an end. Croatia and Germany have helped each other remove their own terror of history and their historical stigma of "bad guys." It goes without saying that both Croatia and Germany took advantage of each other's diplomatic decisions.

By contrast, the indecisiveness of Maastricht-Europe regarding resolution of the Yugoslav crisis only illustrated a growing European fear of any political decision. European "collective security" always depends on a prior blessing from America. The apolitical-economic-Maastrich-market-Europe is dangerously signaling that if serious crisis begins in Eastern Europe today, and in Western Europe tomorrow, European "high politics" and "high politicians," will not be available. The war in former Yugoslavia, as much as it has eloquently exposed the flaws of Versailles and Yalta, has also demonstrated the dangers of political and social Balkanization, both in Europe and America.

¹¹ For a theoretical approach to understanding political decision and "apolitical decision" within the European Community and the United Nations in regard to the Yugoslav crisis, one could still draw lessons from the classic by Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1932).