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Ethnic Cleansing, War, and Genocide in the Balkan Peninsula during the 1990s

The unraveling of former Yugoslavia brought with it a series of wars, mainly the war in Croatia between 1991 and 1995 and the war in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995. Fighting in Slovenia, which lasted 10 days and was settled peacefully, preceded them. The war in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999 was the last armed conflict in the Balkans.

In socialist Yugoslavia, a number of ethnic and religious groups lived together in one state: Orthodox Serbs, Roman-Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosnians and others. Yugoslavia was comprised of six republics: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Montenegro. Two autonomous provinces were part of Serbia: Kosovo and Vojvodina.

The reasons for the unraveling of Yugoslavia are complex and interwoven. In the early 1980s, an economic crisis had befallen the country. Disputes over the distribution of financial means ensued, with the richer republics of Slovenia and Croatia on one side and the other republics on the other.

During the economic crisis, nationalist tendencies, which had been kept under control by the state's founder, Josip Broz Tito, resurfaced. Tensions between the different republics eventually led to Slovenia and Croatia, and then Macedonia and Bosnia, declaring their independence from Yugoslavia.

Throughout the course of history, there had been often bloody clashes between the different ethnic groups in the Balkans. Even in Tito's socialist republic, nationalism bubbled below the surface.

Nonetheless, a 1990 poll showed that a majority of Yugoslavia's inhabitants viewed themselves as Yugoslav first and European second. Only in the third place did they identify with the republic or region where they lived. Moreover, there were 800,000 mixed marriages in the country; in Sarajevo almost one in three marriages was mixed. Religion did not play a big role.

It can very plausibly be argued that ethnic tensions were not the cause, but the consequence of Yugoslavia's unraveling. It was in no way a natural and unavoidable development that those tensions should result in war. Instead, it was political leaders drove violent nationalists to stir up fear and hatred, thus paving the path to war.

If there is one person who could be considered the architect of the wars in former Yugoslavia, it is Slobodan Milosevic, who was president of Serbia at the time. Milosevic viewed the resurfacing of Serbian nationalism as an opportunity to advance his own political ambitions. With the support of Serb nationalists from Kosovo and the help of allies in Serbian state television, he proceeded to spread fear among the Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia.

Serbian television showed extensive footage of massacres committed by Croat fascists against in Serbs during World War II. Fear spread in Serb communities in Croatia and Bosnia that a similar fate could await them.

This laid the foundation for the ideology of a "Greater Serbia." That state would comprise not only Serbia itself, but also those parts of Bosnia and Croatia where large Serb populations lived. There were also nationalist groups among Croats and Bosnians. The newly elected Croatian government under Franjo Tudjman planned to turn the Serbs in Croatia into an official minority with minority rights. The term "ethnic cleansing" was chosen as the "non-word of the year" in Germany in 1992.

The term has become synonymous with the atrocities committed during the wars in former Yugoslavia. According to the plans laid by figures such as Milosevic and Bosnian-Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, Bosnians and Croats had to be removed from those parts of Bosnia and Croatia with large Serb populations if "Greater Serbia" was to be realized. Mass expulsions and massacres became the means to achieve that end. It was mostly Bosnian Muslims who would fall victim to those crimes.

The worst crime of the war, and the worst war crime in Europe since World War II, was the massacre in the town of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia. Serbian troops and paramilitaries killed more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys. Serb civilians, too, fell victim to massacres that Bosnian and Croat fighters perpetrated in retaliation.

Very simply put, the military confrontation during the wars in Bosnia and Croatia can be divided in two phases. In the first phase, which largely took place in 1991 and 1992, Serbs conquered large parts of Croatia (roughly one third of the territory) and Bosnia (more than two thirds of the territory). Their modus operandi was the same in most cases: Local fighters would fight side by side with paramilitaries from Serbia and the Yugoslav army (in Bosnia: Bosnian-Serb Yugoslav army soldiers). The Serbs besieged the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo for almost four years. There was fighting between Croats and Bosnians, too, most notably in the Herzegovinian city of Mostar.

The second phase of the fighting was marked by the significant recapturing of territory by Croat and Bosnian troops. The shifting of momentum in the military confrontation took place in 1995, with the international community responding to the Srebrenica massacre and the ongoing siege of Sarajevo. Starting in August 1995, NATO fighter jets attacked Serb army positions.

In December 1995, the heads of state Alija Izetbegovic (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Slobodan Milosevic (Serbia), and Franjo Tudjman (Croatia) signed the Dayton Agreement. The agreement, which had been brokered by the American special envoy to the Balkans, Richard Holbrooke, ended the war in Bosnia.

In 1993, a United Nations resolution created the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. It has jurisdiction over crimes committed on the territory of former Yugoslavia since 1991.

The perhaps most important trial held by the Tribunal was never concluded: Former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic died in his cell in March 2006. He had been charged with war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity in connection to the wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. The leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzic, was sentenced to 40 years in prison. The Tribunal found him guilty of genocide in connection with the Srebrenica massacre, among other things. Karadzic appealed the conviction.The Bosnian Serb military leader, Ratko Mladic, is facing charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, among other things, in connection to the Srebrenica massacre and the siege of Sarajevo. The trial started in June 2011.

The Croatian general Ante Gotovina was acquitted on appeal in 2012. The acquittal overturned an initial ruling in which Gotovina had been sentenced to 24 years in prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity in connection with acts against the Serb population in Croatia, including murder and deportation. Many viewed the indictment in that case as a legal reckoning with the former Croatian president, Franjo Tudjman. The prosecution had argued that Gotovina was part of a "joint criminal conspiracy" to which Tudjman also belonged. Tudjman died in 1999 as investigations were ongoing.

Naser Oric, commander of Muslim units in Srebrenica, was acquitted on appeal. In an initial ruling, he had been convicted for murder and abuse of Serb civilians in Muslim prisons in 1992 and 1993.In 1991 and 1992, there were numerous peace demonstrations in Yugoslavia, some of which saw more than 100,000 participants. There were at least 18 peace concerts with more than 10,000 people in attendance. There were additional anti-war activities as well. They were unable, however, to stop the spread of conflicts and, eventually, open warfare.

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1. What conflicts were fought in the Balkans in the 1990s?

2. What was the ethnic make-up of prewar Yugoslavia?

3. Why did that multi-ethnic state break apart?

4. What role did ethnic tensions play?

5. What role did Slobodan Milosevic play?

6. Was there nationalism only among the Serbs?

7. What does the infamous term "ethnic cleansing" refer to?

8. Where did the fighting take place?

9. Did war criminals get punished?

10. Was there an anti-war movement and describe?