

A complex mess called Yugoslavia

The most decisive year in the history of the 20th century was 1918. It continues to haunt us right up to the edge of the new millennium.

In that fateful year, the European imperialist victors of World War I, Britain, France and Italy, made three catastrophic blunders. At Versailles, they raped Germany, planting the dragon-seeds of Hitler and his vengeful Nazis. They carved up the Ottoman Empire into artificial statelets, producing today's chronically unstable Mideast. And they created Yugoslavia.

Proclaimed as a nation of unified south Slavs, Yugoslavia turned out to be a dreadful shotgun marriage of Serbs, Slovenes, Croats, Albanians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Hungarians, Bosnians and Turks. The unhappy members of this Balkan house of cards flew at one another's throats almost as soon as the nation was created in 1918.

Seventy-two years later, feuding Yugoslavs may finally be heading for a breakup. Serbs, the nation's largest ethnic group, claim they are being oppressed and exploited by Croats, Slovenes and Albanians.

Current Serbian political culture is a weird Balkan stew of Stalinism and Pan-Slavic nationalism. Serbian populist strongman Slobodan Milosevic rallies his people with calls for "Greater Serbia" and beams as his fans wave pictures of Gavrilo Princip, of all people—the fanatic who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, thus starting World War I.

Slovenes and Croats want democracy, free markets and to be rid of the Serbs. Most tend to be Catholics while Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians are Orthodox. In the best Balkan style, Catholics and Orthodox hate one another even more than they hate the nation's



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2.1 million mainly Moslem Albanians — most of whom live in the province of Kosovo, a sort of colony of Serbia. Albanian Kosovars have been agitating for a separate republic within the Yugoslav federation for a decade.

In the past week, 16 protesting Albanians have been shot down by Serbian security forces. Thousands of Albanians have been jailed and many tortured. Yugoslavia regularly blasts Israel in the UN for its brutal suppression of Palestinians. Now the Serbian army and police are doing exactly the same thing in Kosovo — Yugoslavia's version of the West Bank.

Kosovo is 90% ethnic Albanian but Serbs claim it is the heart of the medieval Serbian Empire — as one poetic Serb put it, "our Jerusalem." Albanians, Serbs and Montenegrins, are using terror to drive out Kosovo's shrinking Serb and Montenegrin minority. Albanians reply that Kosovo and Macedonia used to be almost wholly Albanian before the Slavic invasions of the Balkans.

Serbs are arming to invade Kosovo. Albanians are ready to fight back. Yugoslavia is facing civil war.

One solution to this horribly complex mess is to face the fact that Yugoslavia was a mistake from its creation and scrap the federation. Yugoslavs have irreconcilable differences, inflict mental cruelty on one

another, and have nothing left in common. They should divorce.

Splitting up Yugoslavia would be no easy matter. Serbia and Montenegro would probably merge into one independent state. Croatia and Slovenia might form a loose federation and join into another even looser economic federation with Hungary and Austria — or go their own reasonably prosperous ways.

So far, so good. Now, the hard part.

Serbia would have to give up its dreams of medieval glory and set Kosovo free. The Albanian Kosovars would split between those wanting independence and those for union with neighboring Stalinist Albania. If the latter happened, a mighty Greater Albania of five million would emerge, eager to chop those old foes, the Serbs and Greeks, into kebobs.

There is also the problem of Bosnia, but that's small pilot compared to Macedonia. Greece, Bulgaria and Albania all claim chunks of Macedonia, the strategic heartland of the Balkans. Macedonians can't decide who they are themselves: Some want to stay with the Serbs, others want independence. Nasty people quip that a Macedonian is merely a Greek without a restaurant.

Control of Macedonia was a key issue in the two Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913. It could easily cause another. This, of course, is the main danger in a divorced Yugoslavia. Under one roof, the Yugs are busy fighting one another. Separated, the newly independent states might revert to the bad old days of murderous intrigues and wars with neighbors.

It's really too bad Yugoslavia can't work like the highly decentralized Swiss confederation — a nation of four languages and lots of regional rivalries. I guess there's just too much hot Balkan blood down there.