

Balkan war is brewing

Many North Americans would have trouble finding Yugoslavia on the map — and who can blame them? There aren't really any such people as Yugoslavs and the way things are going in this Balkan hot spot, Yugoslavia could soon join such obscure ex-places as Wallachia or Moravia as a quaint historical has-been.

The most recent crisis in this rapidly defederating federation comes after free elections in Slovenia and Croatia. Voters in both republics thumbed their noses at the nation's impotent federal government in Belgrade and made even ruder gestures at Yugoslavia's dominant Serbs, who make up 36% of the population.

Slovenia, with around two million people, is Yugoslavia's most prosperous region. In fact, it looks more like a chunk of neighboring Austria, to which it used to belong, than gloomy, Stalinist Serbia. Slovenes voted for candidates who want to detach the republic from bankrupt communist Yugoslavia and become part of Western Europe.

With good reason, many are calling Slovenia the "Lithuania of Yugoslavia." Many of the 4.8 million Croats, including the newly elected nationalist government, also favor ditching Yugoslavia — but not until Croatia gets most of the neighboring region of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"Over our dead bodies," thunder back angry Serbs. Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) is the very heart of the darkest Balkans, a backwater of the old Ottoman Empire inhabited by a hodgepodge of ethnic Moslems, Turks, Serbs, Croatians, Montenegrins, Vlachs and a smattering of Albanians. B&H has Yugoslavia's largest Moslem population, followed by rebellious Kosovo. Together, they have about four million Moslems, or nearly 18% of Yugoslavia's total population.

Until now, Yugoslavia's problems were centred on the growing Albanian intifada in Kosovo. There,

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Serbia is trying to crush Albanian nationalism and, following the pattern set by Israel, planning to send Serbian colonists to reclaim the province that is now 98% Albanian.

The Serbs and Slovenes are also at daggers drawn. Serbia has been imposing an economic blockade — shades of Lithuania — on Slovenia and threatening either a coup by the powerful secret police or outright invasion by the army — both of which are dominated by Serbs.

Now Croatia has joined the tribal melee. Beautiful Bosnia and Happy Herzegovina are part of historical Greater Croatia, insist the Croats. Lies! retort angry Serbs. B&H is part of historical Greater Serbia. Both sides are right. Almost everyone, including Albania, has a historical claim to just about every square inch of the area. In the Balkans, historical irredentism means war.

Now I know I'm going to get a flood of letters from angry Croats lecturing me on the empire of King Tomislav the Great. And more letters from Serbs about the glories of Emperor Dusan. Please! Nobody in this day and age has time for medieval Balkan territorial squabbles.

All this would be merely silly were it not happening in the Balkans. There is now loud talk about a clash or even war between Croatia and Serbia for control of B&H — a sort of Yugoslav version of the Nagorno Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or the more dangerous feud over Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

If divorce does come to the Yugoslav federation, division of common property could turn exceptionally ugly, even by Balkan standards. Just 50 years ago, during World War II, Croats and Serbs flew at each other's throats. The result: Some of the war's most horrifying massacres and atrocities.

Catholic Croats burned alive Orthodox Serbs. Serbs crucified or buried alive Croats. The slaughter was almost unimaginable. As Hitler rightly noted, Christianity is the world's only religion that kills in the name of love.

But how can Croatia even think of fighting Serbia, which has twice its population and a good part of the army? By the not-so-secret Croatian plan to enlist the support of Kosovo's two million Albanians, that's how.

A giant Albano-Croatian pincer to crush the hated Serbs. And maybe a little flank attack on the Serbs by the Bulgarians who are just itching to get their hands on Macedonia. Throw in some sword-waving Montenegrins, a few cohorts of Slovenes, legions of Bosnian Janissaries crying "Allah Akbar," throat-slicing Albanian mountaineers and — why not — the Greeks, who also want to get their itchy Hellenic fingers on poor Macedonia. In short, the script for "Balkan Wars, Part III — Croatia's Revenge."

It makes you wonder if the Balkans weren't better off under the bad old Ottoman Turks.

