

The Albanian wild card

Yugoslavia is in an uproar over a bitter fight that has broken into the open among members of Serbia's Communist party. Since Serbia dominates the shaky Yugoslav confederation, when Serbs fall out, everyone pays rapt attention.

The argument has been about the southern province of Kosovo and its large ethnic Albanian population. This is no mere rumpus in a Balkan backwater: Tensions produced by the Kosovo problem could tear the nation apart, as Yugoslavia's defence minister warned last week.

Kosovo was part of Albania until it was annexed by the new state of Yugoslavia after World War I. Today, 80% of Kosovo's population is Albanian. Most people in this nation of 23 million are Slavs (Yugoslavia means nation of the South Slavs). But its Albanians are one of Europe's original peoples and can trace their origins and language back to the Aryan Bronze Age invaders 4,000 years ago. In fact, Albanian is Europe's oldest spoken language—so antique that its hi-tech terms come from Greek and Latin.

Albanians are also fiercely independent, warlike and don't at all like their Slav or Greek neighbors. For the past 50 years, Yugoslavia's Serbian rulers have treated Kosovo's Albanians with alternating neglect, brutality and disdain. Kosovo, in spite of its potential wealth, remains Yugoslavia's poorest and least developed region.

In 1975, decades of simmering Albanian resentment erupted as massive riots swept Kosovo. One third of the Yugoslav army was rushed into Kosovo and the Albanian uprising was crushed. Nearly 900 Albanians died and another 4,500 were reportedly jailed.

But in spite of severe repression, unrest con-

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tinues in Kosovo. At present, about 80% of all political prisoners in Yugoslavia are Albanians. Many of these, according to Amnesty International, have been severely tortured. Curiously, nations like the U.S. and Canada, who are so vocal about abuses in South Africa or Chile, have not uttered a peep about well-documented and persistent human rights abuses in Yugoslavia.

Kosovo's Albanians want their own republic within the Yugoslav confederation and a larger slice of the national economic pie. But Yugoslavia's power establishment is not about to agree. Serbia dominates the confederation because of its control over the two "autonomous" provinces of Vjvodina and Kosovo. If Kosovo broke away, Serbia would lose its pre-eminence and face challenges from foes in the republics of Croatia, Slovenia and even Bosnia-Herzegovina.

There is another problem even more urgent than Yugoslavia's regional politics. Kosovo's non-Albanian Slav minority is fast fleeing the province because of Albanian hostility. At the same time, the birth rate of Albanian Kosovars is 35 per 1,000: along with Albania's, the highest in Europe. Slavs are worried by the Albanian baby boom and, of course, by the prospect that Kosovo may one day want to rejoin neighboring Albania.

It's unlikely Albanian Kosovars would want to become part of harsh, Stalinist Albania—but who knows in the future?

Meanwhile, tension is crackling inside Yugoslavia as traditional animosity between Slav and Albanian re-emerges. First came the case of the Serb farmer in Kosovo who made the bizarre claim that he was raped by Albanians using a large bottle. Then, the recent drama of an Albanian private in the Yugoslav Army who gunned down four Serbian soldiers. In the Balkans, such events have ominous and far-reaching consequences.

Yugoslavia's leaders are now arguing whether to tighten repression of Kosovo's Albanians or to give them more freedom. For the Serbs, the latter is dangerous, for to give freer rein to Kosovo may spark similar demands from Croatia and Slovenia. It would not take too many jolts to make Yugoslavia's not-too-solid confederation fall apart.

Then Europe would be faced by a terrifying and unpredictable crisis: The chance of civil war between Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and Albanians, with the Soviets waiting to intervene.

No one wants this, but shake the Albanian wild card in Yugoslavia's house of cards and the whole thing might come tumbling down. Yugoslavia is held together by inertia and that's-the-way-we've-always-done-itism. Rebellious Albanians might just change all this.

Punch



"In sex education class they're teaching the girls how to use sex as a weapon."