

# Yugoslav pot bubbles

The political earthquake that has swept across East Europe this year has not yet reached Yugoslavia. Even so, the deeply troubled Yugoslav federation is being badly shaken by its own internal crises. It's only a matter of time before revolution comes to Yugoslavia too.

Like its former Marxist neighbors, Yugoslavia is suffering from a wide variety of grave economic problems: Rising unemployment, soaring inflation, a huge foreign debt and shortages of goods. The central government in Belgrade is bankrupt but it dares not cut massive subsidies for fear of rebellion by already furious consumers and workers.

As if all this weren't bad enough, Yugoslavia has another whole set of awesome problems that are yet one more malignant legacy of World War I.

At the end of the Great War, pieces from the wreckage of the old Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires were attached to the independent state of Serbia. The result was a chronically unstable hodge-podge of bitterly feuding ethnic and religious groups.

Orthodox Serbs make up a third of Yugoslavia and dominate the federation's central government, army and powerful secret police. Catholic Croats make up the nation's second largest group. During World War II, the two peoples savagely butchered one another. Add in Montenegrins, Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians and a sprinkling of Magyars, Turks and Vlachs. Plus two million rebellious ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo.

Besides Orthodox and Catholics, about 16% of Yugoslavs are Moslems, including many Albanian Kosovars. For a supposedly communist nation, Yugos take their religion very seriously. Languages include Serbo-Croatian, Slovene, Macedonian and Albanian, the latter Europe's oldest spoken tongue.

Worsening economic problems have rekindled a nasty collection of old ethnic hatreds. The western-oriented, relatively prosperous republics of Slovenia and Croatia have promised to hold free elections and end the communist party's monopoly on

## Punch



"You say that with such sincerity I'm forced to believe you're lying."

## ERIC MARGOLIS



power. They deeply resent what they claim is economic and political domination by Serbia and show signs of wanting to break away from the federation and form some sort of links to Austria and Hungary — a giant step back to the old Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Serbs are furious at the Slovenes and Croats. Worse, they are attempting to crush a rebellion by Kosovo's Albanians who are demanding their own federal state. Amnesty International accuses the Yugoslav regime of widespread human rights abuses in Kosovo, including torture and massive jailings.

Ironically, Kosovo's Albanians are still freer than their fellows in Stalinist Albania. A Serbian strongman, Slobodan Milosevic, has risen to power on a blatantly chauvinist platform, calling for "Greater Serbia" and ruthless suppression of the Albanian uprising. Croatia and Slovenia back the Albanians, while most Montenegrins and Macedonians side with the angry Serbs.

Lately, there have been rumors that the Serb-dominated army may stage a coup to overthrow the independent-minded governments of Slovenia and Croatia. What this means is that Yugoslavia is edging toward what could be a very ugly civil war.

At some time soon, all of these economic and ethnic problems will reach a critical mass. The worst-case scenario would be uprisings against the communist parties of the various republics, followed by fighting between the Serbs and their neighbors. If this had occurred five years ago, the chance of Soviet intervention would have been very high. At least now, Moscow appears likely to let the angry Yugos fight out their quarrels without sending in the Red Army.

A cheerier view is that fed-up Yugoslavs of all ethnic groups may boot out their communist oligarchs and follow a path toward democracy and free markets. In this case, the federation would become even more decentralized — one in name only — as each part went its own way.

Unfortunately, such a process might not resolve the problem of Kosovo, where Albanian and Serbian ethnic nationalism could continue to clash head-on. There's even a remote chance that civil war in Kosovo might draw neighboring Albania into a border war with the Serbians.

No one should underestimate the danger posed by a turbulent or disintegrating Yugoslavia. Other East European revolutions have left nations and borders intact. A blow-up in Yugoslavia could produce a dangerous vacuum in the Balkans that might jeopardize much of East Europe's hard-won freedom. Don't forget that World War I began in a small town in Serbia.