



JAMES BISSETT

**HISTORY OF
WESTERN INTERFERENCE
IN THE BALKANS**



1. Background



As Canadian Ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1990 to 1992, I was a witness to the tragic breakup of that country. There were a number of reasons why Yugoslavia was torn apart but one of the primary causes of the tragedy were the failure of western diplomacy. This is not to say that the Yugoslavs themselves were blameless-not at all-but, nevertheless, western intervention exacerbated the problem and precipitated much of the ensuing bloodshed.

It is said that History never repeats itself, but western interference in the Balkans has repeatedly proven to be disastrous. Lacking adequate knowledge of the region, and ignoring the history and aspirations of the people living there, western governments have historically tried to resolve Balkan problems by pursuing their own narrow foreign policy objectives, which have little or no relevance to the issues on the ground. This was true in the past and remains true today.

As far back as 1878 after the Russian armies supported by Serbia and Montenegro had defeated the Ottoman Turks, the western powers fearing that Russian Pan-Slav dominance would upset the balance of power in the region decided to intervene. Their objective was to revise the treaty of San Stefano, which had ended the Russian-Turkish war and in effect brought to an end Ottoman power in the Balkans.

The instrument of western intervention was the Congress of Berlin, which was convened in June 1878. Otto Von Bismark, the German chancellor was the chairman. The British Prime Minister, Disraeli, along with his Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, attended. The Congress achieved its objective, the San Stefano treaty was undone and Russian influence in the Balkans was neutralized.



One of the means of doing this was to decide that Bosnia- Hercegovina, formerly a province of the Turkish Empire, was to be occupied and administered by Austria-Hungary. The Austrian Foreign Minister, Count Andrassy, predicted an easy occupation-"a company of soldiers and a brass band," would be all that was necessary. It took three months of heavy fighting and over 200,000 troops to occupy the major towns but resistance was never overcome in the mountains and countryside.

The Austrian-Hungarian incursion into Bosnia-Hercegovina ended with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. The cataclysm of the Great War of 1914-1918 followed.

Less than 25 years later, Germany's unprovoked invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941

heralded another western intervention in that troubled nation. The German Wermacht was never able to conquer Yugoslavia but the Second World War inflicted a terrible and indelible legacy on the country that was later to be paid for in the bloodshed and violence of the 1990's.



**Archduke
Ferdinand**

Yugoslavia, as with other Balkan nations, had never been afforded long enough periods of peace or immunity from outside interference in which to work out its own destiny. The nation never had time to foster and nourish democratic institutions and traditions. Yugoslavia's ethnic differences have been frequently exploited by outside powers and used by them to divide the nation and tear it apart with ethnic hatred and violence.

It is wrong to look upon the peoples of the Balkans as bloodthirsty primitives who from time to time set about slaughtering each other. Throughout most of the history these ethnic groups-Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Albanians, Slovenes, Bosnian Muslims, have lived at peace with one another. It is when they became pawns in the game of big power politics that their ethnic differences are exploited and violence among them ensues.

Twice in this century Yugoslavia has been broken apart, and in both instances the breakup occurred either as a direct result of outside intervention or was precipitated by the actions of other states. In both instances the dissolution of the state was accompanied by ethnic cleansing and mutual massacre.

2. The Second World War



To many people not familiar with Balkan history, the violence and bloodshed that took place in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990's is incomprehensible. How is it possible that such atrocities could occur in Europe on the eve of the new millennium? The answer to this is to be found in the events that took place in Yugoslavia during the Second World War.

Following the invasion of Yugoslavia, the country was dismembered and divided among the axis powers, Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria. Croatia was granted independence as an axis puppet state and ruled by Ante Pavelic, the Fascist Ustashi leader. Croatia was awarded by Hitler all of Bosnia-Hercegovina with its large Serbian and Jewish population.

Pavelic and the Ustashi proceeded with a campaign of genocide directed against the Serbian and Jewish populations of Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina. Frightful massacres took place.

Ustashi gangs savagely slaughtered tens of thousands of Serbs in Croatia, often forcing them into their Orthodox Churches and burning them alive. Other Serbs were given the choice of conversion to Roman Catholicism or death. Yet others were driven out of Croatia into Bosnia or Serbia. Thousands of Jews, Serbs and Gypsies were exterminated in Croatian camps. At the most infamous of these, Jasenovac, close to 100,000 victims was killed-and not by gas- but by the bullet, the club or knife.

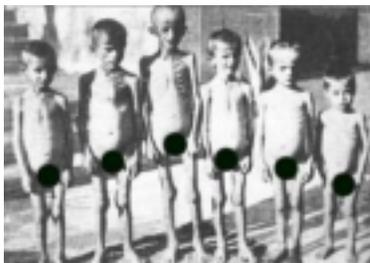


Ustashi Terror

In Bosnia, similar massacres of Serbs took place. The Muslims of Bosnia often assisted the Ustashi killers. Later in the war, the Germans recruited a Muslim SS Division, which gained notoriety for its atrocities against the Serbian civilian population.

After the invasion of Yugoslavia the Italians occupied Kosovo and when Italy dropped out of the war in 1943, the Germans entered Kosovo and promised the province independence. They raised a SS Division from among the Albanian population; the infamous Skenderberg Division, which set about methodically to slaughter Serbs in Kosovo.

As the war progressed Serb guerilla bands retaliated against the perpetrators of these crimes with counter massacres of their own. The horrors committed in Yugoslavia during the war, where over a million people perished, were not forgotten. In Croatia, Bosnia or Kosovo, there were few Serbs who had not lost friends or relatives during the Second World War.



Victims of Jasenovac

These nightmarish memories were still very much alive in the 1990's and in large part account for the atmosphere of fear, suspicion and hostility that rapidly developed in Yugoslavia on the eve of its second dismemberment. Tito's subsequent refusal to allow any discussion of these horrendous wartime events added to the sense that the ghosts of the victims remained at large.



3. *The Tito Years And The End Of The Cold War*

Tito's communist regime brought unity, stability and relative prosperity to Yugoslavia. His break with Stalin and advent of the cold war placed Yugoslavia in a favored position between two great powers. Yugoslavia became eligible for loans from the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.) and eligible for membership in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and entry into association agreements with the European Community (EC) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

As one of the founders of the non-aligned movement, Tito's Yugoslavia enjoyed a high level of international prestige. Its citizens were allowed freedom of travel and in comparison with most of the other countries in the Eastern bloc, Yugoslavs, whether Serb, Croat, Macedonian or Slovene, were proud of their country's status and achievements.

However, things began to go wrong for Yugoslavia in the early 1980's. Their charismatic leader, Tito, died in 1980 and his death coincided with the beginning of a serious economic depression. Throughout the 1970's, Yugoslavia like many other countries had borrowed heavily from the IMF and commercial banks. The era of massive global lending came to an abrupt end in 1979. Sharp rises in oil prices occurred and interest rates jumped to double digits. Remittances from Yugoslavia's guest workers abroad, which had financed half of the Yugoslav deficit since the 1960's, fell dramatically as thousands of workers were forced to return home.

The foreign debt crisis forced the government to introduce harsh austerity measures. Unemployment increased, inflation rose at the rate of 50% per year, and soon the savings of the middle class were wiped out. Food and petrol shortages occurred. Political unrest soon followed.

The two most affluent Republics, Slovenia and Croatia began to question the Federal Government's economic policy. They complained that their revenues were being used to support economically backward Macedonia and the Serbian province of Kosovo. These complaints expressed themselves as claims for more democracy and political autonomy from the Central Government. As communist ideology throughout Eastern Europe began to collapse the vacuum created began to be filled by nationalist and ethnic aspirations.

The internal problems experienced by Yugoslavia were compounded by the changes taking place in the international arena. As the Cold War came to an end so did Yugoslavia's privileged position viz. a viz. the Western powers, especially the United States. In 1989, the United States removed Yugoslavia from its list of countries eligible for Western credits. It was no longer important as a buffer between the Soviet Union and Western Europe. It lost its special standing and became just another country of the Balkans

4. Separist Movements



Slobodan Milosevic

By 1990 it was evident the Yugoslav Federal Republic was experiencing serious strain. Both Slovenia and Croatia were moving rapidly towards separation. In Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic had cracked down hard on the Albanian majority in Kosovo and had removed autonomous status from that province and the northern province of Vojvodina. Albanian unrest had been suppressed with violence. Human rights violations increased and the Albanians in Kosovo withdrew from the political and civil life of that province.

There was every indication of serious trouble ahead. The first democratic elections in the Republics had chosen leaders who had appealed to ethnic passions. Throughout the nation an atmosphere of unrest and fear was evident. Paramilitary groups were being formed. Arms were being smuggled into the separatist Republics. Civil authority was beginning to break down.

It was in Croatia where the first sign of trouble occurred. A change in the Croatian constitution which relegated the Serbian population living there to minority status created an atmosphere of fear and distrust among those who recalled the devastating impact of Croatian nationalism during the Second World War. The election of the right-wing nationalist party of Franjo Tudjman with its anticommunist and anti-Serb campaign added to the concerns of the Serbs living in Croatia, (Serbs made up a little more than 12 % of the Croatian population in 1991). These Serbs began to arm themselves and to demand self-determination. In March 1991 the first armed clashes between Croatian police and Serbian paramilitary groups occurred.

The warning signals that Yugoslavia was beginning to break apart did not at first cause serious alarm among the Western powers. The United States was preoccupied by the Gulf War and more concerned about events that were happening in the Soviet Union. The Europeans were concerned about the Maastricht Treaty and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was only when the first armed clashes occurred and it became apparent that Slovenia and Croatia seemed determined to secede from the Federation that the West turned its attention on Yugoslavia. That attention proved to be unhelpful and too late.



Franjo Tudjman

Initially the West's official position was that Yugoslavia must remain united. Both the United States and the European Union warned the individual Republics that separation from Yugoslavia would not be acceptable and should anyone of the Republics break away that Republic would not be recognized nor ever granted entry into the European Union.

5. Slovenian Independence



James Baker

When in June of 1991, it appeared possible that Slovenia might in fact declare independence, the United States Secretary of State, James Baker, flew to Belgrade and in a one day marathon session met with all of the leaders of the six Republics. He warned them again that Yugoslavia must stay together and remain united. The last person he met with that day was Ante Markovic, the Federal Prime Minister.

Baker told the Prime Minister (who was a Croatian) that if the Slovenes took overt action to secede from Yugoslavia, the United States would not object if the Federal army was called in to preserve the unity of Yugoslavia. Within a matter of days the Slovenes seized by force the Federal customs posts along the Italian and Austrian borders. Markovic, the Prime Minister, ordered the Federal army into Slovenia.

Most observers did not expect the Slovenes to resist against the powerful Yugoslav army (JNA), but contrary to all expectations the Slovenes did resist. Armed with German supplied hand held antitank missiles the Slovenes destroyed a number of tanks and in order to avoid further bloodshed, Markovic ordered the army to withdraw. Thirty-seven JNA soldiers were killed in the brief encounter and twelve Slovene Territorial Defense members lost their lives.

The media coverage of the “Slovene war “ played a major role in shaping subsequent public opinion in the west. The Federal forces were from the outset described as the” Serb-dominated” Yugoslav army, and western media soon depicted the struggle as one of David and Goliath, with the JNA playing the role of the giant Goliath. Thus from the very beginning of the Yugoslav conflict the Serbs were branded as the bad guys even though most of the JNA troops were conscripts from Kosovo or Macedonia.



The Federal armed forces withdrew into Croatia and soon after fighting broke out between JNA troops and Croatian paramilitary groups. The dismemberment of Yugoslavia had begun.

The “Slovene War” marked a turning point in the attitude adopted by western governments towards the possible disintegration of Yugoslavia. Prior to the Slovene unilateral action, the European Union and the United States were in agreement that the nation must remain united. This policy soon changed and it became evident that Germany and Austria were pressing for the recognition of Slovene and Croatian independence. It is now known that as early as 1990 Croatian and Slovene leaders held meetings with senior politicians from both of these countries urging support for independence. During this time the Vatican was openly lobbying for independence and had particular influence on German politicians in Bavaria.



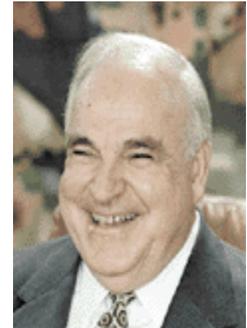
6. *Premature Recognition*

Despite strong pressure from the United States and opposition from France and Britain, Germany's determination to grant recognition prevailed. Chancellor Kohl was able to obtain French and British approval by granting concessions relating to the EC monetary union and Britain was allowed to opt out of the treaty's social charter.

Germany also conceded that all six of the Yugoslav Republics were eligible for independence. It was also agreed before independence would be granted that the Republics would have to meet criteria established by the Badinter Commission, a group of European jurists set up by the European Union to arbitrate disputes and establish criteria for recognition. Without waiting for a decision from the Badinter Commission, Germany announced the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia on December 23, 1991.

The premature recognition of Slovenia and Croatia was a guarantee that the breakup of Yugoslavia would not be resolved by peaceful means. Once again western intervention had exacerbated and complicated a serious Balkan problem. Again the German intervention had little to do with the actual problem faced on the ground in Yugoslavia.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl's ruling party was under severe pressure politically and he needed an initiative to restore the party's standing. The opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) had been advocating recognition and Kohl wished to seize the initiative and capture the issue for his own party. In addition, the Foreign Minister, Hans Dietrich Genscher, had been criticized for reluctant and belated support for the Gulf war. Recognition of Slovenia and Croatia would demonstrate that Germany was capable of taking foreign policy initiatives on its own. Recognition would also change the nature of the struggle in Yugoslavia from an internal dispute to one of a war of aggression against two independent states.



Helmut Kohl



7. Bosnia

As fighting continued to rage in Croatia, it became evident that the war could spread to Bosnia. The diplomatic challenge for the West was to contain the conflict and prevent bloodshed in Bosnia, which because of the events of the Second World War held the potential for dreadful violence. Thanks to the skillful efforts of the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Jose Cutileiro, acting under the auspices of the European Union, an agreement was reached among the three ethnic leaders of Bosnia that seemed to offer an acceptable compromise aimed at preventing violence.

Alija Izetbegovic

The agreement called for an independent Bosnia divided into three constituent and geographically separate parts, each of which would be autonomous. While not a perfect solution the agreement was preferable to civil war. In March 1992, each of the three leaders: Izetbegovic for the Muslims, Boban for the Croats, and Karadzic for the Serbs, signed the so-called Lisbon Agreement. Among diplomats in Belgrade there was general relief and for the first time a sense of hope for the future. Alas it was not to be.

Within days of the Lisbon Agreement, the United States Ambassador, Warren Zimmerman flew to Sarajevo and met with Izetbegovic. Upon finding that Izetbegovic was having second thoughts about the agreement he had signed in Lisbon, the Ambassador suggested that if he withdrew his signature, the United States would grant recognition to Bosnia as an independent state. Izetbegovic then withdrew his signature and renounced the agreement.

Within days the war had spread to Bosnia. Ironically, after 200,000 deaths and massive destruction throughout Bosnia, the Muslims were afforded by the terms of the Dayton Accords, less territory than they had been guaranteed by the Lisbon Agreement.



There has been a good deal of speculation about why the United States chose to intervene in Bosnia and why it influenced Izetbegovic to renounce the Lisbon Agreement. One explanation is that the United States wished to demonstrate to the Muslim world that it could support Muslim causes. After the Gulf War, it is suggested, the USA was anxious to find a Muslim position with which it could ally itself. The official U.S position for its intervention was that recognition was the only way to prevent the war from spreading to Bosnia! Whatever the reason, it seems evident the U.S. intervention did more harm than good.

8. Kosovo



Given the experience of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, it is little wonder that the Albanians in Kosovo realized the most effective way to gain independence was to take up arms and resort to violence. This had been the formula for success before and there was every reason to expect it would work again. Indeed, given the successful public relations campaign that had been waged against President Milosevic and the Serbs, and the record of human rights violations in Kosovo, it was inevitable that Kosovo would be the next part of Yugoslavia to break away.

As the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) escalated its armed attacks on Serbian police stations and stepped up its assassinations of Serbian politicians and Serbian sympathizers among the Albanian population, it could count on Serbian security forces to retaliate with ruthless anti-insurgency tactics. The KLA could also count on the western media to give full coverage to these heavy-handed measures. By October 1998, the fighting in Kosovo had escalated to the point where the United Nations felt obliged to intervene.

A United Nations Security Council Resolution called for an end to the fighting, a withdrawal of the Yugoslav army to barracks and the introduction of OSCE observers into Kosovo as monitors on the ground to ensure that both parties kept the peace. Initially the army and security forces complied with the UN Resolution, but the KLA did not stop its campaign of terror and the army once again reacted with force. Villages suspected of harbouring KLA activists were burned and their inhabitants dispersed. Many innocent people lost their lives.

Unable to stop the violence the United States and the European community decided to intervene. The instrument of their intervention was to be the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

9. The NATO Bombing



The story of NATO's military intervention in Kosovo is well known. It is a story of unmitigated disaster. None of its policy objectives were achieved. The long-range consequences of its intervention have seriously damaged the global security structure established since the end of the Second World War. Its intervention was in violation of international law and its own commitment to using only peaceful means of resolving international disputes.

NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia was done without the involvement of the United Nations. It failed utterly to do serious damage to the Yugoslav military. The bombing has destroyed the infrastructure of Serbia and has caused untold environmental damage to the countries along the Danube river. In the name of humanitarian objectives it caused a humanitarian disaster. NATO took sides in a civil war and became the air force of the KLA to wrest away from a sovereign state an integral part of its territory. The President of the Czech Republic, has stated that Kosovo was the only war that was not fought over territory-but in this he was terribly wrong, Kosovo has been taken from Serbia and given to the Albanians.

Many apologists in the west argue that the NATO intervention was to stop ethnic cleansing but NATO bombed Yugoslavia because President Milosevic would not sign the Rambouillet Agreement. The two provisions of that Agreement which made it impossible for any sovereign state to sign were eventually dropped by NATO after seventy odd days of bombing failed to subdue Yugoslavia. Ironically, through the good offices of the Russians, NATO agreed not to insist on the occupation of all of Yugoslavia by NATO troops and to forget about insisting on a referendum in Kosovo within three years. These were the two provisions of the Rambouillet Agreement that had caused the bombing in the first place!

Some have argued that Yugoslavia was from its inception an artificial state and was therefore doomed to eventually break apart. This may or may not be true. What cannot be denied is that western involvement in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia since it became a sovereign nation in 1918 has helped to bring about its dismemberment. Western intervention there has been a history of diplomatic failure.





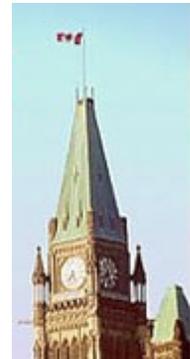
Ambassador Bissett was born in the small village of DELORAINE, located in the South-West corner of Manitoba close to the U.S. border and the Province of Saskatchewan. During the Second World War his family moved to Winnipeg and he received his secondary and university education in that city. It was there he became interested in Eastern European cultures and history

After pursuing postgraduate studies in history and political science he won a fellowship to study Public Administration at Carleton University in Ottawa. Upon obtaining his Masters Degree he joined the public service in 1956.

He spent 37 years as a Canadian Public Servant in the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and Foreign Affairs. He was appointed head of the Immigration Foreign Service in 1974 and became Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Social Affairs in 1980. In the early '70s he served at the Canadian High Commission in London England. He was appointed Canadian High Commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago in 1982 and served there until 1985 when he was seconded to the Department of Employment and Immigration as Executive Director to help steer new immigration and refugee legislation through Parliament.

In 1990 he was appointed Canadian Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania. He therefore witnessed at first hand the Yugoslav tragedy to which he attributes much of the blame to Western diplomatic blundering and deliberate scheming. He was recalled from Yugoslavia in the summer of 1992.

He retired from the Foreign Service upon leaving Yugoslavia and accepted a job in Moscow as the head of an International organization helping the Russian Government establish a new Immigration Ministry and designing and implementing settlement programs for the thousands of Russians returning to Russia from other parts of the former Soviet Union. He returned from Moscow in 1997 and is enjoying retirement in Ottawa but continues to do contract work from time to time.



Ambassador Bissett is married and has 5 children and 8 grand children. He was shocked at NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia and has been an outspoken critic of the war, appearing frequently on radio and television and on speaking engagements across Canada.