

Old Animosity, Exploited Today, Underlie Complex Balkans Puzzle

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AS the likelihood grows that American forces will be directly involved in trying to restore the peace in the former Yugoslavia, many Americans are asking how the slaughter there began.

Unfortunately, what is happening today in the Balkans is nothing new. It is the continuation of the ethnic and religious hatreds that have swept the region for centuries, made worse by radical nationalists' cynical exploitation of these animosities.

The ethnic mixture of the Balkans began to form about the 5th century AD. Vast tribal migrations swept across Europe: Germanic tribes came west, followed by Slavs to their east. In succeeding centuries Magyars (Hungarians), Mongols, Tatars, and Bulgars ranged over the Balkans. Between Western and Eastern Europe, a great gulf developed. Rome had fallen, but the Roman Empire in the East, with its capital at Constantinople (Byzantium), lasted another 1,000 years. The Roman church without a state and the Byzantine church subservient to the emperor split over longstanding political and theological disputes. This chasm went right through the Balkans: Hungarians, Slovenes, and Croats were Roman Catholic, while Romanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbs were Eastern Orthodox.

All across Europe nation-states began to form around the most powerful tribes. But in the 14th and 15th centuries, a series of catastrophes struck the Balkans. First the Ottoman Turks defeated Serbia at the battle of Kosovo in 1389. Constantinople (now Istanbul) fell in 1453. By 1529 the Turks had fought their way to the gates of Vienna, which they besieged again in 1683. All political, cultural, and economic evolution in those parts of the Balkans under Turkish rule stopped under the oppression of the Turkish sultan.

For the next 400 years, the history of the Balkans was a history of rivalry among the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. Croats, Slovenes, and Transylvanian Romanians lived under the influence of Vienna and Budapest. Romanians, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Serbs, and some Albanians clung tenaciously to their Eastern Orthodox faith, which became entwined with their national aspirations. Most Albanians and some Slavs, however, converted to Islam.

The Balkan peasantry was kept impoverished as agricultural riches were shipped off to feed the Ottoman Empire. The Turks played off tribes, clans, and families against each other, poisoning the political culture.

Christianity was barely tolerated.

None of the subsequent development of Western and Central Europe - the growth of guilds and the middle class, the decline of feudalism, the Reformation and Counterreformation, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment - touched the Balkans.

By the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was in serious decline. Most of the Balkan ethnic groups began to agitate for independence and their own states. But their villages were often scattered among each other.

Little by little each group threw off Turkish rule. Russia felt a special calling to help its Orthodox Slav brethren, the Serbs and Bulgarians, and provided political or military support.

But the rule of the Balkans is: Everything for my ethnic group and nothing for yours. The group on top now governs at the expense of the others; the groups out of power wreak vengeance when the power balance shifts. People see themselves as Serbs, Romanians, or Albanians first and as individuals second.

This attitude is preserved by the region's economic backwardness and low educational levels. It is especially true in rural areas. While cities may be ethnically mixed, villages usually are ethnically pure, or nearly so.

After the Turkish and Austrian Empires collapsed at the end of World War I, the victorious Allies carved up the remains into a series of new, artificial Balkan states. The southern Slav groups were lumped together in what became Yugoslavia. Serbia was the dominant partner, which led to constant friction with the Croats. The new country never had a chance. Nazi Germany invaded in 1941 and set up a fascist Croatian puppet state. Its Ustashe troops committed terrible atrocities against Bosnian and Croatian Serbs. Serbian nationalist guerrillas, the Chetniks, retaliated in kind.

Communist partisans under Josip Broz Tito, armed by the Allies, fought the Germans to a standstill, broke with the Chetniks, and took power at the end of the war. Communist rule under Marshal Tito kept a tight lid on ethnic feuding, but it continued to smolder. When Tito died in 1980, he left in place a collective presidency of Yugoslavia that rotated among the six republics: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

But without Tito's personal magnetism and willingness to use force, the system soon began to break down. After communism collapsed in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Yugoslav federation began to dissolve as Croats and Slovenes demanded independence, partly in pursuit of historic aspirations but also in fear of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's repression of the Albanian minority in Kosovo. Mr. Milosevic and Croatian President Franjo Tudjman made things worse by their inflammatory rhetoric and their policies of grabbing land from neighboring republics, to create a greater Serbia and a greater Croatia, and to expel other groups.

The region remains a tinder box: Greeks are nervous about the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia; Montenegrins, still united with Serbia in a rump Yugoslavia, are growing restless; and serious tensions persist between Hungarians and Romanians.

The most dangerous area is Kosovo province in Serbia. A Serbian heartland, it is now inhabited mostly by ethnic Albanians, who have seen their rights suppressed by the Milosevic government. Almost half the Albanians in the world live in Serbia; should the Serbs start an ethnic-cleansing campaign, it is doubtful Albania could stand by. Such a conflict could ignite tensions between Greece, which likely would side with the Orthodox Serbs, and Turkey, which would support the Muslim Slavs and mostly Muslim Albanians.

The question now is whether the US can provide the leadership that will take the Balkans in the direction of peace or whether the region will sink deeper into disaster.

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