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**'Good fences make good neighbours' – A. Lieven. Comment with regard to the partition vs. federalism question.**

**Introduction**

The partition versus federalism question revolves around whether it is better to partition societies experiencing ethnic conflict along ethno-religious lines, or whether it is better for ethnically divided societies to be united under some form of federal system or similar power-sharing arrangement.

Those advocating partition have tended to do so for pragmatic reasons, seeing partition as the 'lesser of two evils', and the only realistic short-term method for preventing, stopping or limiting an ethnic conflict. Those advocating federal or power-sharing solutions tend to do so for more idealistic reasons, which may not necessarily offer practical solutions to ethnic conflict, however laudable they are in theory.

Partition in itself may not 'make good neighbours', because ethnic conflicts often persist even after the ethnic groups are physically divided, as in the case of India and Pakistan. Nevertheless, partition is often the only alternative to bloody civil war. Ethnic wars also tend to exacerbate and entrench ethnic divisions, making the possibility of co-existence less likely. Therefore, partition can be a good method of preventing ethnic conflict.

The possibilities for preventive partition, or reconciliation and power-sharing after an ethnic war will be limited by the specific circumstances and situation on the ground. The wars in the Former Yugoslavia during the 1990's provide a good case study for the consideration of the 'partition versus federalism' debate.

Observers have been much divided over the way the conflicts have been settled, particularly the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, where ethnic conflicts have been effectively frozen, but remain unresolved. Since Anatol Lieven's comment relates to the Former Yugoslavia, I will focus on this as a case study.

In this essay I shall consider the following questions:

- 1) How was ethnic conflict managed in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia?
- 2) In the case of Bosnia, did misplaced idealism mean an opportunity was missed to peacefully partition the country, in March 1992?
- 3) What are the relative merits of the arguments for and against partition in Bosnia?

### **Ethnic Conflict Management in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia**

According to O'Leary and McGarry's scheme of classification, there are four main ways in which ethnic conflicts can be managed:

- (a) Hegemonic control
- (b) Arbitration
- (c) Cantonisation and/or federalisation
- (d) Consociationalism or power sharing.<sup>1</sup>

Remarkably, between 1945 and 1980, Marshal Tito ruled the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia using a combination of all four of these methods to effectively manage the existing ethnic tensions.

Prior to World War II, Yugoslavia had been under centralised monarchic rule. After the war, under pressure from the Allies and Croat political leaders, Tito was obliged to divide Yugoslavia into six republics within a decentralised federal system. At local administrative level, Yugoslavia was divided into counties, each county consisting of the territories of several villages or middle sized towns. The majority of the counties were ethnically homogenous.<sup>2</sup>

Tito developed a system whereby power was delegated to loyal communist elites in the various Yugoslav Republics. Hegemonic control was exercised by the

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<sup>1</sup> O'Leary, B & McGarry, J. 1993. *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation*. (New York & London: Routledge)

<sup>2</sup> Djordjevic, Jovan: *Local Self-Government in Yugoslavia*. *American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Apr., 1953), pp. 188-200

Communist Party, with Tito at the top. During the 1940's and 1950's Tito's political opponents (including nationalists and secessionists) were either killed or sent to the Goli Otok labour camp. Anyone who ceased to be loyal was purged and replaced.

Tito contrived to set each of the republics in competition with each other, with himself as the ultimate arbitrator. He carefully managed economic investment throughout Yugoslavia to ensure that the various republics were economically interdependent.

In 1974, in order to manage increasing demands by ethnic nationalists, Tito (in his role as 'arbitrator') created a new constitution that gave greater autonomy to the Yugoslav Republics. He also created two new autonomous provinces in Kosovo and Vojvodina, in response to demands by ethnic Albanians and ethnic Hungarians for greater autonomy. In the 1974 constitution, Tito also laid the foundations for a consociational system, to come into effect after his death.

Under this consociational system each of the republics would take it in turns to provide a President of the Yugoslav presidency, and each of the republics would exercise a veto on any major federal decisions. This consociational arrangement lasted from Tito's death in 1980 until 1991, when Yugoslavia descended into civil war.<sup>3</sup>

Tito's death was a major factor in the failure of the Yugoslav federal system, because without his leadership hegemonic control was weakened and no-one else could fill his role as the ultimate arbitrator.

### **Failure to Partition Bosnia Prior to the Bosnian War of 1992-1995**

The collapse of communism across Eastern Europe in 1990 played an important part in the failure of Yugoslavia. Socialist ideology emphasised a class identity, secularism, and brotherhood and equality as opposed to national and ethno-religious identities. Once socialism was seen to be failing, national and ethno-religious identities came to the fore. Other factors include economic problems, the rise in

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<sup>3</sup> Beloff, Nora. 1997. *Yugoslavia: An Avoidable War*. New European Publications. Ch. 1, "Tito's Poisoned Legacy."

nationalism, and political opportunism by the political elites in the various Yugoslav republics.

Another key factor in the collapse of Yugoslavia was the tacit or in some cases overt support to nationalists and secessionists by outside Western European and US actors. In many instances, political opportunists in Yugoslavia were encouraged by outside actors. For example, Slovenia and Croatia could count on the support of Germany and Austria, and Germany was able to use her dominant position in the European Community (EC) to overcome potential opposition from other EC countries.

Within the context of the wider collapse of communism across Eastern Europe, and the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Croat, Slovene and Bosnian nationalists were able to present themselves as democrats breaking free from communist oppression. This particularly appealed to the over-simplistic and almost pathological hatred of 'communism' of many US actors and a number of European ones. When asked why she supported the Croats over the Serbs, Margaret Thatcher said that she would always defend a democrat (meaning Franjo Tuđman) over a communist (meaning Slobodan Milošević).<sup>4</sup> Effectively, those seeking to preserve the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were tainted with the brush of 'communism' at a time when history was not on their side.

Crucially, in the case of Bosnia, intervention by the US ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmerman appears to have been fatal in scuppering a peace-plan which could have prevented the subsequent war. The Carrington-Cutileiro peace plan which resulted from an EC summit in February 1992 proposed a power-sharing arrangement for Bosnia and devolved government based on a division of the territory into ethnic cantons. It was agreed by all sides, and signed by Alija Izetbegović for the Muslims, Radovan Karadžić for the Serbs and Mate Boban for the Croats. Ten days later Izetbegović met with the Warren Zimmerman in Sarajevo. After meeting the US ambassador he immediately withdrew his support for the peace plan. Izetbegović subsequently declared independence for Bosnia, despite repeated warnings from Radovan Karadžić that the Bosnian Serbs would violently resist such a move.

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<sup>4</sup> Beloff, Nora. 1997. Yugoslavia: An Avoidable War. P.65

## **Arguments in favour of a federal state in Bosnia and Hercegovina**

Radha Kumar has sought “to counter the idea that partition can be a solution to ethnic conflict.” Kumar sees policies of partition as “anachronistic”, and a throw-back to colonial style ‘divide and rule’ tactics. Worse still, she argues, is the policy of ‘divide and quit’ – whereby international actors partition a country, and then leave, without policing the division, as the British did in India in 1947. She has argued that the ‘lesser of two evils’ argument in favour of partition rests on ‘primordialist’ arguments that ethnic communities are fundamentally irreconcilable. She also criticises the ‘partition as the lesser of two evils’ doctrine as being based on the international community’s desire for “getting out as quickly and cheaply as possible”.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1990 elections in Yugoslavia, ethnic nationalists won substantial majorities in all the Yugoslav republics. Although Kumar acknowledges this, she questions whether the majority of Yugoslavs really were so nationalistic, and whether the nationalist leaders truly had a popular mandate to act as they did during the subsequent wars. She also sees the war as primarily about religion, rather than other ethnic issues of language, culture, customs or race. Kumar argues that “proposals to cantonize or partition are more likely to inflame and prolong ethnic conflicts than to solve them” and do more harm than good in the long run.<sup>6</sup>

However, as Susan Woodward pointed out, writing about the Dayton agreement in 1997, “Although Bosnia is more divided now into three ethnically homogenous mini-states... the war has stopped. Elections in September (1996) legitimised the parties of war, but the brutality of ethnic cleansing the siege of Sarajevo, and the atrocities are gone from our nightly television.”<sup>7</sup>

Kumar has certainly been proved wrong in one respect; 15 years after the Bosnian War ended there are still UN and NATO peacekeepers in both countries, as well as

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<sup>5</sup> Kumar, Radha. 1997. *Divide And Fall: Bosnia In The Annals Of Partition* (Verso). Ch.1

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P168.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Woodward, *The Brookings Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Spring, 1997), pp. 29-31

dozens of other international agencies and more than \$5 billion dollars has been spent on peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation.<sup>8</sup>

The political scientist Mary Kaldor has similarly argued that cosmopolitan solutions should be sought to the conflict in Bosnia. She has argued that in effect, the war was not between rival ethnic groups, but between cosmopolitan Bosnians and nationalist Serbs. In that sense, she sees the war as a war between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Any partition of Bosnia along ethnic lines would be tantamount to letting the nationalists win, and would signal the defeat of Bosnian cosmopolitanism.<sup>9</sup>

### **Arguments supportive of partition along ethnic lines**

Chaim Kaufmann has commented that, “The implication of the critics' logic is that most of those who have become refugees in ethnic conflicts could have safely remained in their original homes and enjoyed reasonable economic, political, and cultural freedom if partition and population transfers had not been externally imposed on them. Their bottom line is that working to reintegrate ethnic groups at war with each other is both more moral and, in the long run, more practical than acquiescing in partition. This is wrong. The security dilemma generated by intermixed populations ensures that ethnic wars always separate the warring communities; this process cannot be stopped except by permanent military occupation or genocide, or by not having the war in the first place.”<sup>10</sup>

He goes on to conclude that once ethnic conflicts reach a threshold level of violence, reconciliation becomes impossible. This has been labelled the “Humpty-Dumpty theory”.<sup>11</sup> This is exactly what happened during the wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990's. The wars were started by nationalist elite groups, who were to

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<sup>8</sup> Bose, S. 2002. Bosnia After Dayton. P22.

<sup>9</sup> Kaldor, Mary. 'New & Old Wars.'

<sup>10</sup> Kaufmann, Chaim. 1998. 'When All Else Fails: Ethnic Population Transfers and Partitions in the Twentieth Century,' International Security, Vol. 23, No. 2. P.124

<sup>11</sup> Smootha, S. and Theodor Hanf use this description for Kaufmann's theory that societies divided by ethnic conflict 'cannot be put back together again'.

some extent pandering to popular nationalist views. The large numbers of people who were not nationalists to start with become more nationalistic as a result of the war.

Anatol Lieven has further suggested that, *“The way in which NATO and its political masters misunderstood the real dynamic of events in Kosovo reflects a characteristic failure of the liberal mind (including most of the Western left and a great majority of Americans), which clings to a basically optimistic view of human nature. Such a habit of mind finds it hard to grasp that certain nations really are implacably at odds over the control of ethnically mixed territory. Between 1992 and 1995, an unwillingness to accept partition helped to prolong the war. Today, it has committed us to the hopeless task of trying to turn Bosnia back into a working multi-ethnic state.”*

Lieven goes on to suggest that, *“Where a tradition of socially-sanctioned violence and banditry is present in both parts of an ethnically-mixed society, the only way of containing this in a reasonable equitable way is sustained policing by an outside power.”* In direct contrast to Kumar, he suggests that the outside policing force will have to adopt an approach very different to that common in most Western societies, which may involve collective punishments for whole communities (for example at the village level), such as fines, confiscations and restrictions of movement. He points out that similar policies were effectively used by the British in India.<sup>12</sup>

A number of studies support the theory that many Bosnians were not intrinsically nationalist, but were led and manipulated by opportunistic nationalist leaders.

Ivan Maček’s anthropological study of combatants involved in the siege of Sarajevo found that the fiercest nationalists were the political elites, who were not doing the fighting, but were gaining economic or political power while others suffered, but nevertheless had to find a way to justify the suffering, in order to motivate people to keep fighting. The soldiers at the sharp end were far more likely to challenge and question the nationalist cause and its righteousness and legitimacy, because they were the ones who were likely to die for it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lieven, Anatol. 'Divide and Survive,' Prospect, May 1999

<sup>13</sup> Maček, Ivana. 'Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime.'

An anecdote that lends further support to this viewpoint comes from Branko Trbović, a retired Colonel and Tito's former head chef. He tells an insightful story into the attitudes of Tuđman, Milošević and Izetbegović. On 28th March 1991, the presidents of the Yugoslav republics met in Split (Croatia), to discuss the preservation of the Yugoslav federation.

Tuđman made a political statement when for lunch he served Dalmatian ham with olives, Croatian village pasta and Dalmatian pot roast. All traditional Croatian dishes, and things that the Serbs would hardly ever eat. At the subsequent meeting in Belgrade, Milošević and his wife gave a stereotypical Serbian lunch, to get even with the Croats. They started with kajmak (traditional Serbian soft cheese) and Serbian polenta, followed by Karageorgevich schnitzel (a Serbian dish named after the 19th century Serbian hero). At the third meeting hosted by Izetbegović, he served traditional Bosnian dishes; Balkan filo pastries, Ottoman style soup with okra, roast baby goat and tufahije, a sweet Bosnian desert. The menus reflected their attitude towards the negotiations.<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If the best chance for preventing ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia would have been, as Chaim Kaufmann suggests, "by not having the war in the first place", it seems logical to consider why the Yugoslav federal system failed, and to consider the factors that led the Yugoslav republics to secede from the federation and whether the break-up of Yugoslavia was desirable, in retrospect. There certainly seems to be a distinction in the policies of the US and Western European countries between 'good' Yugoslav nationalism and secessionism (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo) and 'bad' Yugoslav nationalism and secessionism (Bosnian Serbs, Kosovo Serbs north of the river Ibar).

The best opportunity to preserve Bosnia as a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic federal state may have been for it to have remained within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After all, the war started as a direct result of President Izetbegović's decision to

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Branko Trbović in 'Cooking History'. Taskovski Films.

secede from Yugoslavia. Few of the critics of the Dayton Peace Agreement or the subsequent *de facto* partition of Bosnia under Dayton have been similarly critical of the original secession, or have adequately considered the reasons for the failure of the federal system in Yugoslavia.

What Kumar fails to do is suggest a realistic alternative to partition of Bosnia. Similarly, Mary Kaldor, is critical of the Dayton Settlement, but offers no alternative other than a vague call for 'cosmopolitanism'.

While there is some evidence to support their idea that most Bosnians are not intrinsically nationalists, even if this is the case, it seems that either enough of the Bosnian population were prepared to fight for nationalist causes and that the local political structures in place in Bosnia support nationalist positions.

There is strong evidence from the Bosnian War to support a Functionalist Modernist argument that nationalist elites with political agendas manipulated their own populations for political reasons. Nevertheless, if such dynamics exist on the ground, these realities cannot simply be ignored. We have to take the world as we find it, not as we would wish it to be, and existing political structures and powerful elites need to be dealt with whether or not they are as democratically representative as we would like.

Remarkably, many of those who are critical of the partition of Bosnia and the Dayton peace agreement fail to look at the historical background of the conflict, or question the role of liberal Western international actors in helping to provoke and prolong the conflict in the first place. While strongly favouring a 'cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multicultural' Bosnia, they frequently fail to consider that between 1945 and 1992 Bosnia did function as a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multicultural republic, as a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The ethnic conflict and subsequent *de facto* partition of Bosnia resulted from the failure of the federal arrangement. They also often overlook the strength of ethnic nationalism. While it is true that large numbers of Yugoslavs were not nationalistic, and were in fact quite cosmopolitan and content to live within a tolerant multi-ethnic state, real ethnic differences and historical memories also existed that were capable of creating ethnic division.

Whether it is better to partition an ethnically divided state or to encourage ethnic groups to live together under a federal system or some form of power-sharing arrangement depends strongly on a variety of local factors. Well intentioned actions have had unintended outcomes.

While opponents of ethnic partition can safely occupy the theoretical moral high ground over the question of partition, they rarely offer practical solutions to ethnic conflict. Those who have supported partition have done so for practical reasons, but are not necessarily averse to multi-ethnic or cosmopolitan outcomes if these could be realistically achieved.

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