

Mark McQuay, MA
Collegium Civitas

INEVITABLE WAR? EXAMINING YUGOSLAVIA AS A FAULT LINE CONFLICT

Introduction

In his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilisations*, Samuel Huntington contended that clashes of cultural and religious identities would be the main source of conflict in the post-Cold War world; people define themselves according to their shared culture, and in opposition to others. The inevitable result of this, he argued, is conflict (Worcester, Bermanzohn, Ungar, 2002, p. 211). This conception of inevitable war on the fault-lines between civilisations has been applied widely, from post-Colonial India and Pakistan, to the 1990 Gulf War, to today's Ukraine – and indeed by Huntington himself, to former Yugoslavia.

This article looks to demonstrate, however, that the primary causes of conflict in Yugoslavia were not civilisational, but political, economic and nationalist. While it is true that the religious, cultural and national heterogeneity of Yugoslavia which led Huntington to categorise it as a “cleft state” – divided between the “Western”, “Orthodox” and “Islamic” civilisations – formed part of the structural (or systemic) background to conflict, civilisation was not the sole structural factor, and nor can structural factors alone be held accountable for the outbreak of conflict. Furthermore, it will be shown through the example of Macedonia that “civilizational” allegiances do not preclude conflict, and divides do not necessarily precipitate it.

In order to demonstrate this thesis, the role of Yugoslavia's heterogeneity in causing conflict will be analysed, alongside a discussion of the validity of the argument that the peoples of Yugoslavia do indeed belong to different civilisations. It will be seen that – if the “civilizational” argument is accepted - this was far from being the only reason for the outbreak of conflict, and would not necessarily have led to such an outcome in the absence of a number of other contributing factors. In order to demonstrate this, the peaceful secession of Macedonia from the Yugoslav federation will be examined, as will the lack of major ethnic conflict within this small yet ethnically diverse state during the 1990s.

1. Six Nations or Three Civilisations?

Yugoslavia was, from its inception, a multiethnic state comprising six “constituent nations”, each with its own particular historical experience, culture and, to some extent at least, language. Some of Yugoslavia’s republics were largely ethnically homogenous, for example Slovenia, with 87.84% of the population regarding themselves as Slovenes and speaking the Slovene language, according to the 1991 census (Hayden, 2013: 89). Slovenes – categorised by Huntington as “Western” due to their Catholicism and history of Austro-Hungarian, rather than Ottoman rule, lived almost exclusively in this republic.

Other republics were much more ethnically heterogenous, particularly Bosnia, where 43.47% Muslims lived alongside 31.21% Serbs and 17.38% Croats. Even Croatia – with 78% Croats had a sizeable Serb minority of 12.2%, and while Serbia proper was largely homogenous, its northern region of Vojvodina was 16.9% Hungarian, while Kosovo was dominated by an estimated 81.6% ethnic Albanians¹. Macedonia was also an extremely heterogenous region, with a large Albanian minority. The 1991 census found a 65.3% majority of Macedonians, with a sizeable 21.73% Albanians concentrated mainly in the north-west of the country, along its borders with Albania and Kosovo.

As the 1991 census was seen to be unreliable, having been prepared during a period of instability in Yugoslavia, a second census was carried out in Macedonia three years later, finding similar results. Albanians, many of whom boycotted both censuses, disputed the results however, claiming to constitute upwards of 40% of the population (Weller, 1992, pp. 569-607).

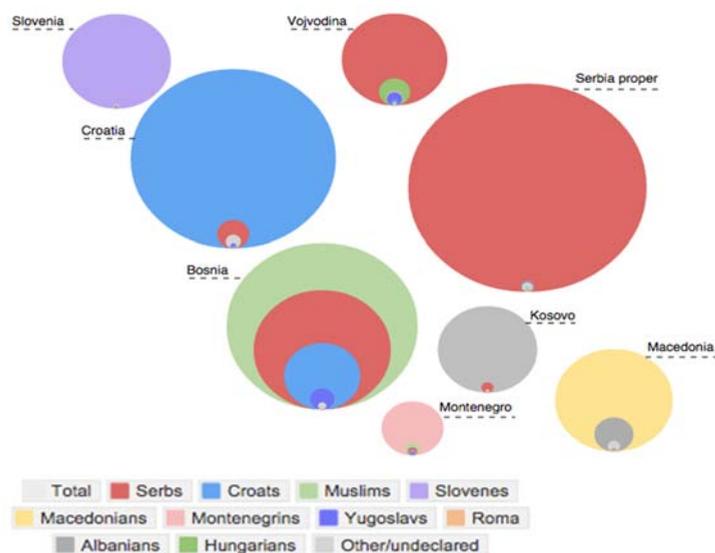
While the ethnic diversity of Yugoslavia is clear, it is not possible to divide these ethnic groupings by “civilization” as easily as some may suggest. Bosnia’s Muslims, Serbs and Croats, for example, had all been exposed as much or as little to what Huntington describes as the tenets of Western civilisation: “classical heritage, Catholicism and Protestantism, European languages, the separation of state and church, rule of law, pluralism, individualism and representative institutions”.

To describe these groups as fundamentally, civilisationally different would appear to be somewhat of an overstatement, based primarily on religious profession – itself a red herring as “Muslim” was used in Bosnia not only as a religious label, but also as an ethnic one; to be a secular Bosnian Muslim was – and still is – entirely possible. The same holds true of Macedonia, where Albanians, Macedonians, Roma and Turks had

¹Due to a boycott of the 1991 census by Albanians, these figures are based on an official projection produced by the Yugoslav government

lived under the same Ottoman administration for centuries. Similarly, elsewhere in Yugoslavia, such divisions were overly simplistic; the Serbs of Western Slavonia and Krajina shared much of their historical experience with “Western” Croatia.

Figure 1. Ethnic make-up of Yugoslavia’s six republics and two autonomous regions according to the 1991 census, scaled by population



Source: Figure elaborated by author based on 1991 Yugoslav census data using Piktochart.com.

It is important to note that differing national identities do not in themselves lead to “inevitable” war, and multinational states are not “naturally” destined to fail. As late as 1989, 36% of the population of Yugoslavs declared themselves to be “Yugoslavs” by nationality, rather than choosing to identify with a single national group. Burg and Berbaum write that “[g]iven the ethnic, social, demographic, and economic diversity of these counties, the declaration of Yugoslav identity by such proportions of their populations constituted a remarkable assertion of shared political identity, or “sense of community” (as quoted in Caytas, 2012) Three years later, as Bosnia and Croatia were ravaged by war and ethnic cleansing, there was little difference in the country’s ethnic composition. Furthermore, in Macedonia, ethnic heterogeneity alone was not enough

to cause conflict; only when there was a significant and sudden change in the country's ethnic composition in the wake of the Kosovo War did conflict appear².

2. Other factors precipitating conflict

Ethnic and religious diversity – whether analysed as “civilization” or otherwise – was far from the only factor which made Yugoslavia vulnerable to conflict. Conflict such as that in Yugoslavia during the 1990s arises as a result of a combination of structural conditions, including among others cultural, ethnic or religious differences among peoples, combined with proximate (or enabling) factors – those “social, political and communications processes and institutions” (Creative Associates, 2007, p. 8) which enable them to affect people's lives (for example government policies or a dysfunctional political system). This creates a state of high political tension, which may be ignited by a triggering (or immediate) event, for example the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, which sparked the First World War.

While Yugoslavia's extremely heterogenous ethnic makeup may be regarded as a structural factor in conflict, it was far from being the only such factor. Another was the semi-authoritarian Communist regime of the late 1980s and early 1990s. A lack of democracy means that a state is unaccountable to its people. Democracy allows people to feel they have a stake and a voice in the process of governing a country and that they may settle disputes and advance their views without recourse to violence in order to be heard. Where democratic structures are not present, parties are more likely to see violence as the only way of achieving their goals. In the final days of the Yugoslav Federation, moves towards democracy and pluralism were rejected by the elite in Belgrade, leaving Slovenes and Croats among others to believe their only way to be heard was through the use of violence. In the case of Bosnia, the unaccountability of Serbian and Croatian leaders who agreed at Karadžorđevo to divide Bosnia between them led Bosnian Muslims to believe their only way to resist domination was to fight. Finally, in Kosovo, the lack of accountability and increasing use of illegitimate force of the Serbian government in the late 1990s was certainly a factor in the formation of the UÇK (Woodward, 2000). The relative stability of Macedonia following its independence can be attributed to the rather

² Due to limitations of scope, the Albanian insurgency that took place in Macedonia in 2001 will not be discussed further in the present article.

more representative political regime that was established in the republic following independence, with a ruling coalition composed of both Macedonian and Albanian elements³.

Table 1. Structural, proximate and immediate factors leading to conflict

Structural (systemic) factors	Proximate (enabling) factors	Immediate (triggering) factors
Historical: - strength of social group identity, inter-group divisions - received cultural differences (language, religion, etc) - colonial policies - social assimilation/isolation - groups' geographic concentration - extent of past inter-group conflict	Authoritarian regime: - accomodative reform - corruption/exploitation - suppression of opposition Accomodative regime: - leadership's politicisation of issues - malevolent interpretation of causes, ethnic ideologies	Repressive actions
Objective shifts in relative material position and/or political status of social groups with resulting social dislocations	Climate of social tension, fear, insecurity	Acts of violence and civil strife
Current: - resource scarcity and general - economic decline - population growth - environmental resource depletion (eg. food production)	Strength of integrative institutions and policies (state organs, government policies, civil society)	Provocative mass communications, rumours
	International factors: - availability of arms - political support for particular causes - suggestive models from abroad - economic pressures	Sudden economic crisis (eg. commodity price drops)

Source: adapted from: Creative Associates, 1997, p. 9.

³ The stability of Macedonia should not be overstated, and there were indeed tensions between the country's two major ethnic groups, particularly in areas such as education where Albanians did indeed feel a degree of discrimination from the majority-Macedonian government.

In addition to structural factors which underlie conflict, proximate factors, such as government policies, changing economic circumstances, and political instability, are also needed for conflict to arise. Such factors “activate” the structural or background conditions described above, and thus create an increased risk of conflict. In the absence of such factors, structural factors may remain “dormant”, as they do in many other ethnically diverse states.

The primary proximate factor behind ethnic violence in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s was the foreign debt crisis, which began in the wake of the 1979 Oil Crisis. The IMF became involved soon thereafter, establishing a three-year macroeconomic stabilisation programme aimed at restoring liquidity and growth to the country’s economy, which was by this time heavily dependent on foreign imports. This programme was intended to “liberalize foreign trade, promote exports, restore financial discipline, and in general make the economy attractive to capital markets and foreign investment” (Woodward, 2000: 134).

While they would have been nothing out of the ordinary in Western Europe, these IMF-backed reforms, which included devaluation of the Dinar, the end of foreign-exchange retention quotas and limits on wage increases, took a heavy toll on Yugoslavia. Reform caused large-scale unemployment, which affected over one million people by 1985 (Woodward, 1995, p. 4), and necessitated austerity measures to be taken by the federal government. These measures undermined the federal government’s ability to provide the system of social welfare upon which its legitimacy and support among the people largely depended. The IMF reforms also demanded the redistribution of control over monetary policy and foreign exchange from the republics to the National Bank in Belgrade, as well as increased discipline over republican banks (Woodward, 2000, p. 135).

The removal of the republics’ independent jurisdiction of “resources they had come to assume [were] theirs by right” (Woodward, 2000, p. 135), coupled with the erosion of the federal government’s ability to fulfil its social contract led to its increasing delegitimisation in the eyes of many Yugoslav citizens. This was particularly the case in Slovenia – the richest and most modern economy of the six Yugoslav republics – where “full employment for nearly the entire post-war period had generated a political system... that is usually associated with market (bourgeois) economies” (Woodward, 2009, p. 79). Slovenian economic policy was rather protectionist in regard to the other Yugoslav republics and was unwilling to accept demands from the central government which could threaten its high employment levels, high standard of living and competitive relationships with the West (Woodward, 2000, p. 79).

By 1981, only 4% of trade crossed republican and regional borders (Crawford, 1998, p. 229). Popular support became associated more with the republic's government than that of the federation as a whole; the poorer South was perceived in Slovenia particularly as an albatross keeping it from development (Woodward, 2009, p. 146). What began as economic nationalism developed into political nationalism, reinforced by the ethnic and linguistic differences between Slovenes and their southern neighbours. A similar process took place in Croatia.

In the poorer republics of Serbia (in particular, Kosovo), Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro economic crisis was much more severe. Unemployment in Serbia (excluding Kosovo) between 1981 and 1985 was 17-18% and in Kosovo it exceeded 50% (Crawford, 1998: 229-230). These republics opposed different parts of the centralising IMF reforms each for their own reasons; Bosnia, for example opposed devaluation because of its dependence on intermediate goods from convertible currency areas (Crawford, 1998, p. 235). These divisions weakened loyalty to the federal government and strengthened the appeal of nationalism.

A further proximate factor conducive to the rise of nationalism and, eventually, violent conflict in Yugoslavia was the existence of a political system described by Crawford (1998: 205) as "ethnofederalism". Crawford explains that it was the existence of this system which translated economic crisis and mixed ethnic groups into political crisis and violent conflict, whereas in neighbouring Bulgaria, similarly ethnically (and, according to Huntington's analysis, civilisationally) mixed and also heavily indebted and struggling with IMF conditionality, ethnic violence did not break out, even after a government collapse in 1989 (Crawford, 1998, p. 203).

Ethnofederalism describes a highly decentralised federal system based around the principle of ethnicity; In Yugoslavia, six federal units existed, each with a titular nationality. Additionally, Kosovo and Vojvodina were also given a degree of regional autonomy after 1974 due to their large regional minorities (Albanians and Hungarians, respectively). The federal government had exclusive control over only a narrow range of competences, with most decisions requiring the approval of the six federal units. By the 1980s, Yugoslavia had "established a more decentralised system of industrial, political, and territorial decision-making than any other existing federation" (Crawford, 1998, p. 228) in which the republics had become almost self-governing power centres. Indeed, owing to the principle of unanimity in federal decision-making, republican governments were able to effectively block any legislation they disagreed with. Decentralisation of political authority was followed by a subsequent shift of economic and political loyalty

to republican governments. This system was the mechanism by which the economic hardship of the 1980s came to have such a polarising effect on inter-ethnic relations as the “collapse of the social welfare system led to a rise in the use of [regional] patronage networks, quotas, and cultural and ethnic bonds as the central mechanism by which scarce resources were allocated” (Crawford, 1998, p. 25).

As well as allowing for the translation of economic crisis into ethnic tension, the institutions of ethnofederalism also in themselves politicised ethnicity. A system of ethnic quotas known as the *ključ* (key) had been established in order to ensure the proportional – or in some, equal – representation of the state’s constituent nations and nationalities in appointments to public office. Although created to ensure balance among the peoples of Yugoslavia and promote *bratstvo i jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity), this system in fact led to the politicisation of ethnicity, particularly under the conditions of economic crisis, where “in those poorer communities where job cuts were most severe and federal government had been critical to the local economy, the employment requirement of proportionality and parity among national groups made ethnicity more salient rather than less” (Crawford, 1998, p. 235). Importantly, the divisions created by ethnofederalism were along “ethnic” or “national” lines, rather than “civilizational” ones. Little solidarity was felt by Slovenes towards their fellow ‘Western’ Croats when President Kučan effectively “gave Milošević a *carte blanche* to create a Greater Serbia” at Karadžorđevo in January 1991, for example (Sell, 2002, p. 128).

Ethnofederalism had been developed following the Second World War with the intention of “transform[ing] ethnically based political identities into cultural/administrative identities and thereby prevent[ing] the reemergence of extreme identity politics as a dominant political force” (Crawford, 1998, p. 209), but in reality the effect was much the opposite; ethnofederalism politicised ethnicity and created the necessary conditions for economic crisis to polarise Yugoslav society.

The divisions of ethnofederalism led to a fear of exclusion among minority communities when independence separated them from their “ethnic capitals” (ie. Belgrade for the Serbs of Bosnia and Croatia, Zagreb for the Croats of Bosnia). Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia doubted the commitment of Bosnian Muslim and Croatian nationalist governments to the preservation of their social, political and cultural rights, particularly in Croatia after the adoption by the nationalist movement of symbols associated with the fascist Ustaša regime notorious for their persecution of Serbs.

In Kosovo, separation of ethnic Albanians from their ‘ethnic capital’ had been a reality since the first days of Yugoslavia. Unlike the peoples of the six republics, Albanians were not recognised as a “constituent nation” of Yugoslavia, but as a minority group. In 1974, however, a new Yugoslav constitution had awarded Kosovo (and Vojvodina) an autonomous status within Serbia. In effect, this autonomy had much the same effect as awarding republican status to the region, with one essential caveat: while the republics had a right to secede from Yugoslavia, autonomous regions did not. As elsewhere, ethnofederalism had the effect of politicising identity in Kosovo. Furthermore, when Milošević’s Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution toppled the Albanian leadership of Azem Vllasi in the late 1980s and soon thereafter removed much of the region’s autonomy, the move was seen as an attempt to subjugate the Albanian people. Kosovo spent much of the 1980s under police rule and “[b]y the end of the decade, 584,373 Kosovo Albanians, one half of the adult population, would be arrested, interrogated, or interned” (Rogel, 2003, p. 168). A parallel state structure built up to replace Serbian state institutions such as hospitals and schools. While peace was maintained in Kosovo throughout the Bosnian and Croatian wars, thanks in a large part to Ibrahim Rugova’s non-violent Democratic League of Kosovo, this parallel state system that had developed was untenable. When Rugova’s movement failed to restore the region’s autonomy or achieve independence, the Albanian population began to turn instead to the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK), and ethnic violence became a reality.

The effects of ethnofederalism were present throughout Yugoslavia, including Macedonia, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent. In the last days of Yugoslavia, Macedonia was second only to Bosnia in terms of ethnic heterogeneity, with a large Albanian population concentrated near the Albanian and Kosovan borders, as well as smaller Turkish, Roma and Serbian minorities. Nonetheless, the republic was able to achieve a peaceful transition due to its “weak ethnofederal legacy” (Crawford, 1998, p. 246) and the resulting pursuit of coalition government which kept the radical nationalist VMRO party out of office, despite winning a plurality in the republic’s 1990 elections. Macedonia’s peaceful separation from Yugoslavia and further success in avoiding internal conflict supports the thesis that ethnic or “civilizational” heterogeneity in themselves do not lead to inevitable conflict.

The primary structural factors causing instability in Macedonia following its independence were indeed not internal, but external. Newly independent Macedonia found itself isolated and unprotected from its four neighbours, traditionally characterised in Macedonia as the “Four Wolves” (Ackermann, 2000, p. 71). Once again, it is clear that

“civilization” was not a factor in conflict in Macedonia; three of the country’s four neighbours share its Orthodox tradition, yet proved just as problematic for the small state as predominantly Muslim Albania. Serbia briefly supported an irredentist movement in the north of the country, and it has been suggested that Milošević conspired with his Greek counterpart, Konstantinos Mitsosakis to destabilise the newly independent state (Phillips, 2004, p. 54). Greece, meanwhile, blocked Macedonia’s entry into international institutions such as the UN due to disputes about the country’s name and symbols, claimed by Greece to be Hellenic property and implicit of territorial claims south of the former Greek-Yugoslav border. Greek efforts to punish Macedonia for its ‘appropriation’ of Hellenic culture reached their peak in 1994, when a unilateral trade blockade was placed on the country, significantly damaging the country’s economy, which was already suffering due to its commitment to the concurrent UN embargo on its northern neighbour, Serbia. Such disputes, as well a number of minor contentions with Bulgaria, show clearly that any thesis of cultural affinity between Macedonia and its Orthodox neighbours is unsustainable; no culture is a monolith, yet Huntington treats them as such. While conflict with Albania was certainly present, it was largely subdued, and never reached the peaks of Macedonia’s dispute with Greece, which remains partially unresolved even today.

Conclusion

This text has sought to illustrate the difficulty of imposing the civilisational paradigm of conflict proposed by Huntington on the reality of former Yugoslavia, and the falsehood of the assertion that violent conflict in Yugoslavia was the inevitable result of civilisational differences between the ethnic groups present within the federation.

It has been seen that dividing the ethnic and national groups of Yugoslavia by civilisation, based on language, religion, culture and history is particularly problematic, due to the wide diversity existing even within established ethnic groups. Furthermore, it is difficult to find evidence that it was civilisation, rather than nation or ethnicity that divided the peoples of Yugoslavia, or any sense of civilisational solidarity between groups which share this identity.

Rather than civilisation, it is clear from the above that the true causes of conflict in Yugoslavia were much more diverse. While civilisation did not play a particular role in creating conflict, ethnicity and nationality certainly did, creating the structural background for conflict. This was not the only structural factor, however, and there is no

evidence that ethnic heterogeneity necessarily leads to conflict. In Yugoslavia, this was combined with other factors: first, the semi-authoritarian system which prevented minority groups from feeling they had a stake in the governance of their republic; secondly, the ethnofederal system, which – contrary to its aims – politicised ethnicity and made it increasingly salient in Yugoslav politics; and third, the economic decline of Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which created the conditions for economic nationalism to develop among Yugoslavia’s republics and, when combined with those factors above, translate itself into political nationalism.

The example of Macedonia shows that the descent into nationalist violence which occurred elsewhere in Yugoslavia was not the inevitable result of the state’s diversity. In the absence of a strong ethnofederalist legacy and with a post-independence government pursuing representative, democratic government, ethnic violence in Macedonia was largely avoided throughout the 1990s.

References

- Ackermann A. (2000), *Making peace prevail*, 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press.
- Bieber F. (1999), *The Conflict in former Yugoslavia as a “Fault Line War”?*, “Balkanologie”, Vol. III (1)
- Caytas J. (2012), *The Role of Identity in the Outbreak of the Yugoslavian War*, “Small Wars Journal”, August, No. 1(5)
- Crawford B. (1998), *Explaining cultural conflict in ex-Yugoslavia: Institutional weakness, economic crisis, and identity politics*, in: *The myth of “ethnic conflict”*, (eds.) Crawford B., Lipschutz R., 1st ed., Berkley: University of California at Berkeley
- Creative Associates International (1996), *Preventing and Mitigating Violent Conflicts: An Abridged Practitioner’s Guide*, Washington: Creative Associates International
- Phillips J. (2004). *Macedonia*, 1st ed., London: I.B. Tauris
- Rogel C. (2003), *Kosovo: Where it all began*, “International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society”, Vol. 17 (1)
- Weller M. (1992), *The international response to the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, “American Journal of International Law”

- Woodward S. (2000), *Costly Disinterest: Missed Opportunities for Preventive Diplomacy in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1985-1991*, in: *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized: Preventive Diplomacy in the Post-Cold War World*, (ed.) B. Jentleson, 1st ed., Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
- Woodward S. (2009), *The Political Economy of Ethno-Nationalism in Yugoslavia*, "Socialist Register", Vol. 39 (39)
- Worcester K., Bermanzohn S., Ungar M. (2002), *Violence and politics*, 1st ed., New York: Routledge
-

Mark McQuay

marksmcquay@gmail.com

Inevitable War? Examining Yugoslavia as a Fault Line Conflict

Abstract

This article examines the case for viewing the conflicts that took place in Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1999 through Huntington's civilisational paradigm, whereby conflict is the inevitable result of the existence of "cleft states" such as Yugoslavia, which lay on the fault line of Western, Orthodox and Islamic civilisations and was therefore pre-disposed to civilisational conflict. This article argues instead that divisions in Yugoslavia were national, rather than civilisational and fomented by a wider, more nuanced range of factors which are not taken into account by Huntington.

Key words: *Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Kosovo, fault line conflict, clash of civilisations*

E-mail contact to the Author: marksmcquay@gmail.com