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## **The Yugoslav Peoples's Army: Between Civil War and Disintegration**

by Dr. Timothy L. Sanz

Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.



August, a crisis in the Balkans, and a revolutionary upheaval in part of Europe--these words raise the hair on the back of the neck. Just a bit less than eighty years ago, Europe inaugurated this century of total war, thanks to the inability of its monarchs, statesmen, and generals to deal with a Balkan Crisis, the latest manifestation of what diplomats then called the "accursed Eastern Question." In the wake of that failure of statecraft, million-man armies marched into battle from one end of the continent to the other. Looking back on the long interval of peace which Europe has enjoyed since the end of the Second World War, the present crisis confirms the reality of a profound shift in the European security system and raises the question of whether the emerging security system in Europe will be able to deal with new Balkan crises.

For several decades, while the military might of two ideologically-hostile blocs stood poised for action in Central Europe, a hypothetical internal crisis in Yugoslavia was often seen as an element in a scenario for bringing about a NATO-WTO military confrontation. It is symptomatic of the new situation in European security that the onset of such a blow-up, pitting ethnic groups against one another and the Yugoslav People's Army [YPA], has not set off a systemic crisis in Europe. At the same time, existing European institutions for intervention and crisis resolution, i. e., the European Community [EC] and the Conference on Security and Confidence-Building in Europe [CSCE], have not been able to check the ethnic violence, which threatens to dismember the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [SFRY], create a sea of refugees within Yugoslavia and without, and resurrect a climate of communal violence and fear, which could go unchecked for decades. The international community at the onset of the Yugoslav crisis spoke with one voice about the need to maintain the territorial integrity of the SFRY, but, two months into a bloody conflict, some are beginning to fear that Yugoslavia has become a "Humpty-Dumpty," which all the EC's horses and men cannot put together again.

New security problems connected with ethnic tensions, economic disorders, and the collapse of older socio-political institutions have not, in this case, proven easy to resolve. For four decades

Europe, thanks to the bloc stability of the Cold War, has not been forced to face so serious a threat of ethnic violence, challenging existing borders and usurping an existing state's monopoly on violence within its borders.

In post-Cold War Europe these issues have emerged with full force in Central and Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia is the first test of the post-Cold War security order in Europe. At the core of the current crisis is the fate of the YPA. Its survival or transformation into a Serbian national army will, in good measure, determine the fate of Yugoslavia and provide a solid indication of the viability of Europe's post-Cold War security system. What makes this situation most disturbing is that, according to some analysts, the Yugoslav crisis is not an anomaly but the manifestation of a specific stage in post-Cold War Eastern Europe and a potential scenario for future developments on a grander scale in the Soviet Union. <sup>1</sup> The recent, mutual recognition of each other's independence by the Republics of Lithuania and Croatia make such linkage explicit. <sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the Yugoslav case, like that of the USSR, carries with it a host of international ramifications relating to disputed territories and the status of ethnic minorities, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Vojvodina being the most prominent. The number of scenarios for a peaceful resolution of the Yugoslav crisis gradually narrowed in the spring of 1991, until the prospects of civil war and dissolution of the SFRY outweighed the likelihood of a constitutional transformation into a confederative state. This prospect raised the risk of a "Balkan Lebanon." <sup>3</sup>

### ***BACKGROUND OF THE CURRENT CIVIL WAR***

Until the Slovenian and Croatian declarations of independence in June 1991, the YPA was the last functioning federal institution of Tito's state, and was itself in deep crisis. The Yugoslav League of Communists has disintegrated as a ruling party. Successor elements hold power in some of the republics, most notably President Slobodan Milosevic's Socialists in Serbia. But there is no Yugoslav Party that bridges the cleavages of ethnic politics. The collective presidency, which assumed de facto and de jure executive authority after Tito's death, has been unable to act because of divisions in its ranks, reflecting the tensions among Yugoslavia's six republics and two provinces.

The northern republics of Slovenia and Croatia are set upon de facto independence, while Serbia, along with Montenegro, is committed to the existing federal systems, which the Slovenes and Croats believe has been a disguised "Greater Serbia." Bosnia-Herzegovina, a microcosm of the ethnic diversity that is Yugoslavia, favors a new federalism, a moderate position between the two extremes. In the wake of the outbreak of fighting its leadership has called for the internationalization of the crisis and expressed fear of "far-reaching interethnic conflict" within its own borders. <sup>4</sup> Macedonia, with its own ethnic tensions and international complications, has moved towards independence, with talk of a Balkan federation and a "union of sovereign states." <sup>5</sup>

Elements of the old League of Communists in Serbia, renamed the Socialist Party of Serbia and promoting Serbian nationalism, have remained in control but were, until the outbreak of fighting, challenged by a Serbian opposition for more democratic reforms. President Milosevic has spent

the last several years promoting a program of Greater Serbia at the expense of any compromise in support of the federation. He rode to power as a defender of interests of the Serbian minority in Kosovo against the claims of its Albanian majority for self-rule, and has brought the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina directly under Serbian control. In Kosovo, where 90% of the population is Albanian, this has meant imposing rule from Belgrade by force of arms.<sup>6</sup> The deteriorating economic situation in Serbia itself, combined with efforts to limit democracy within Serbia, finally resulted in confrontations between Milosevic and the opposition in Serbia in March 1991, leading to mass protests over control of the Serbian media and federal military deployments to Belgrade.

The present crisis is more than just a reassertion of old ethnic conflicts. The regionalization of economic decision-making in the 1980s undercut any prospect of federal leadership. Milosevic refused to support federal economic reforms unless his claims in Kosovo were recognized. At this juncture, as Remington has pointed out, "The road to Yugoslav market socialism had detoured down the ally of national and ethnic strife."<sup>7</sup>

Yugoslavia entered a deep economic crisis. Over the past several years the country has experienced a declining GNP and run-away inflation, which reached the incredible rate of 2000% in 1990. Despite the best efforts of Prime Minister Ante Markovic government, it has shown no signs of abating. His administration did manage to bring inflation temporarily under control and carried out currency reform. But the federal government's program collapsed as the economy continued to deteriorate in the face of growing civil unrest. The Yugoslav socialist-market economy faced a rising tide of closed firms and increasing unemployment.

The tourist industry, which has brought Yugoslavia about \$2.5 billion per year, has been seriously disrupted by the climate of violence. By late March 1991 the federal Social Accounting Service reported that 7,293 firms, or 23% of all those in Yugoslav, were insolvent in late February. With a current unemployment rate of 20% and the prospects of another 1.5 million workers losing their jobs by the end of the year, Yugoslavia faces economic collapse.<sup>8</sup> There exists a reciprocal relationship between the economic crisis and ethnic tensions.

This dire economic situation makes the repayment of Yugoslavia's \$18 billion foreign debt very problematic. Break-up of the Federation would create serious problems for foreign creditors, who would find it difficult to collect from the successor states. Moreover, the division between the more prosperous republics of the north (Slovenia and Croatia) and the Balkan south, led by Serbia, has fueled ethnic unrest. Croats and Slovenes accuse the current federal system of bleeding their republics to support development in the more backward regions, especially for the benefit of Serbian interests.<sup>9</sup>

This spring, as Slovenia and Croatia moved closer and closer to declaring their formal independence from Yugoslavia and circumscribing the power of federal law and institutions within their borders, ethnic tensions rose between the Croatian majority of 4 million and the Serbian minority of 600,000. Serbian enclaves took steps to leave Croatia, once that Republic declared its independence, setting in motion confrontations between local Serbs and Croats and pitting Serbian irregulars against Croatian police and police reserves, who were viewed with distrust by the Serbs as the embryo of a Croatian national army. For the last several years, and

with greater intensity since last August when Croatian nationalists won local elections, Yugoslavia has moved deeper and deeper into a political crisis fanned by ethnic unrest and communal violence, punctuated by scandal and mutual accusations.

In the latest round the intention of the Croatian Republican government to hold a plebescite on secession from the existing federation set in motion the efforts of the Serbian majority in Krajina in western Croatia to hold their own vote for succession from Croatia. As part of that campaign armed Serbs have sought to isolate Croat villages in the region, leading to the deployment of Croatian paramilitary forces. On May 12, 1991, this referendum was held, with 99% voting to leave an independent Croatia and join Serbia <sup>10</sup>. Located several hundred miles from the nearest Serbian territory, Krajina became a tinder box waiting for the match to spark a civil war.

As a tense spring gave way to a bloody summer, rumors concerning a military coup to eliminate Yugoslavia's collective State Presidency, thereby preventing the office from rotating from Serb Borisav Jovic, to Croat Stipe Mesic. Communal violence ebbed and flowed, but each crisis saw an increased intensity, making civil war seem more likely. The killing of 12 Croatian police in what appeared to be a deliberate ambush at Borovo Selo in the Slavonia District, which has a Serbian majority, was a taste of things to come. In the wake of these events, tensions and hatreds between Serbs and Croats reached a postwar crescendo. Croats in the largely Serbian Krajina district of Croatia, Serbs in Croatia, and even Yugoslav troops feared for their lives. Everywhere vigilance was the order of the day.

Some Serbs in Croatia fled into the neighboring Serbian-dominated province of Vojvodina. "Chetnik" and "Ustasha, the wartime terms" for Serbian and Croatian armed nationalists bands respectively, came into open usage <sup>11</sup>. These very terms carry with them the horror of the violence which Croats and Serbs inflicted upon each other during World War II, when more than 10% of Yugoslavia's population was killed. Attempts by Catholic and Orthodox religious leaders and political moderates to defuse the incipient violence provided only momentary relief. The existing public order was under attack by nationalists of all varieties, who insisted that Tito's post-war Communist state was an ethnic prison for their nationality at the expense of others, and declared their open hostility to the existing order.

The role of the military in a new confederative order pitted Croatia and Slovenia against Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia during discussions among experts in the spring of 1991. Croatia and Slovenia proposed the creation of republican armed forces and reduced the role of the YPA to a joint command in peacetime, while the other republics called for the retention of a unified armed forces for national defense, supported by reserve and territorial forces. <sup>12</sup>

Such opposition increasingly took the form of paramilitary groups. The YPA came under challenge as the sole military instrument of state through the creation of paramilitary groups in the various republics and their subordination to local police. By spring 1991, Slovenia had organized a militia of about 30,000 men, and Croatia had raised a force of about 40,000 militia and another 4,000 special forces troops to fight terrorism. <sup>13</sup> The creation of such forces represented a serious challenge to the sovereignty of the SFRY and the legitimacy of the YPA. According to the YPA, such forces had targeted the YPA for destruction as a first step in

preparation for an anticipated civil war. <sup>14</sup> Moreover, the creation of Croatian paramilitary forces led the Serbs in Croatia to create their own paramilitary force.

Croatian sources initially pictured their militia as a self-defense force, designed primarily to counter the threat of Serbian terrorism. Its forces would not threaten to attack anyone beyond the border of Croatia, but they would be sufficient to deter an attack and prevent any attempt by the YPA to intimidate by force of arms the Croatian Republic, as did Soviet forces in Vilnius in January 1991. <sup>15</sup> Special forces loomed large in the missions of the Croatian forces in the face of this threat. <sup>16</sup> By April 1991, however, the threat had escalated into low-intensity conflict within Croatia itself, and the Republic set about creating the National Guard Corps, composed of professional, uniformed and armed formations. <sup>17</sup> The appearance of such Croatian forces spawned the creation of Serbian para-military forces in Croatia and placed the YPA in the untenable position of trying to separate armed groups intent upon civil war. Serbian nationalists began to speak of these irregulars as "chetniks," the term for the Serbian nationalist, anti-Communist movement of World War II.

In a further escalation of communal violence, on May 6 1991, Croatian protesters attacked navy headquarters in Split, killing a guard, a young Macedonian conscript. Federal Secretary of Defense, General Veljko Kadijevic, warned that "Yugoslav society has already entered a civil war" and the army would open fire on any attackers. Kadijevic presented an ultimatum to the collective Presidency: if federal and republic officials "failed to ensure Peace, [the Yugoslav armed forces] could efficiently do so themselves." <sup>18</sup> The news of the guard's death sparked protests in Skopje demanding that Macedonian soldiers serve only in their republic.

Kadijevic, known to be a tough officer loyal to Yugoslavia, committed the YPA to protecting the state and constitution from its enemies, foreign and domestic. He has stated that the idea of a Yugoslav state is more than two centuries old and that a Yugoslav state has existed for more than 70 years. He supported the concept of a modernized "democratic socialism, based upon economic efficiency, political democracy, the rule of law, a humane and just society." <sup>19</sup> In the face of a collective presidency which would not or could not act, Kadijevic had to deal with a situation in which both the constitutional order of the state and the army itself were under attack.

### ***THE YUGOSLAV PEOPLE'S ARMY***

The Yugoslav People's Army, which General Kadijevic commands, is composed of about 150,000 active troops and 510,000 active reservists. The Armed Forces, which have experienced severe cuts in funding over the last decade--down from \$2.9 billion in 1988 to \$2.2 billion--is the chief institution still funded out of the Yugoslav national budget [50% of the federal budget]. <sup>20</sup> Conscripts are called to service for 12 months. The officer corps of the YPA is drawn predominantly from among Serbs and Montenegrins. Current estimates suggest that 54.25% of the officer corps is Serbian. <sup>21</sup> Until January 1991, when the YPA officially banned party political activities in its ranks, about 96% of the officer corps were members of the League of Communists. <sup>22</sup> The regular YPA was only the tip of the Yugoslav spear.

The concept of national defense, which the SFRY had put into practice to protect the state from foreign intervention, now made the prospect of a Yugoslav "Lebanon" all the more likely. The

YPA had emerged out of Tito's World War II partisan army, and had incorporated the concept of partisan warfare into the concept of national defense. In the wake of Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Yugoslav government embraced the concept of Total National Defense [TND]. A conscript military system, backed by Territorial Defense Forces [TDF]--large reserve contingents trained and equipped to carry out territorial defense--would support YPA regulars in resisting external attack. TDF reserves, in theory, can provide 1.5 million men under arms in wartime. The Yugoslav General Staff was expected to direct combat operations against an aggressor. The military districts provide army staffs and, in case of war, would oversee mobilization of reserves. The very features that made such a system so credible against external attack during the Cold War contributed to the collapse of the SFRY's monopoly on the instruments of violence and made civil war both more likely and more lethal.<sup>23</sup> Efforts in the early 1980s by Fleet Admiral Branko Mamula, as Federal Secretary of Defense, to dismantle TDF in Kosovo in the face of Albanian agitation for republic status were a first indication that the TND concept could not be adjusted to the mounting tide of ethnic tensions.

Without the League of Communists as a ruling party in all the republics, no political mechanism existed to check republican ambitions to create their own armed forces. Among the senior officers of the YPA, strong support emerged for the League of Communists--Movement for Yugoslavia [LC-MY]. They sought to use LC-MY to galvanize a trans-ethnic Yugoslav political movement. One of the explicit objectives of the generals was to restore the YPA's monopoly on the instruments of violence in the SFRY.

YPA efforts to disarm the Slovenian TDF in 1990 proved unsuccessful. The YPA High Command did manage to transfer the small arms assigned to Croatian TDF units to federal arsenals. However, the government of Croatia was able to purchase 20,000- 30,000 small arms from external sources to equip an already trained personnel.<sup>24</sup> The attempt to bring to trial the former Minister of Defense for Croatia, Colonel General Martin Spegelj, for importing arms from Hungary in preparation for an armed confrontation with the YPA collapsed in the face of mass demonstrations before the court in Zagreb.<sup>25</sup> Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, speaking during an official visit to Budapest in April 1991, characterized the arms transfer as a contribution to a "democratic solution" to the Yugoslav Crisis.<sup>26</sup> Croatia and Slovenia ceased sending conscripts to YPA garrisons outside their republics in the spring of 1991, leaving the YPA with only voluntary recruits from those republics for federal duty.

### ***THE OUTBREAK OF CIVIL WAR***

As the outbreak of fighting in Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991 demonstrated, in a national mobilization the active reserves and territorial defense forces split along ethnic lines, making mobilization the spark for civil war. The Army's heritage is Yugoslav, drawing upon the traditions of Tito's partisan movement, which denied the primacy of ethnic loyalties in fighting for a socialist Yugoslavia. That very loyalty is anathema to Slovenian and Croatian national movements, but has deep psychological roots for many of the senior officers, who remember well the communal violence of the war years. General Blagoje Adzic has been a frequent target in the Croatian press for his anti-Croat prejudice. He allegedly said "so what if several thousand heads roll? The world will be in an uproar for a week, and then forget about it."<sup>27</sup> The Croatian weekly Slobodni tjednik contends that Adzic is consumed by a pathological hatred of Croats: "In



all Croats he sees blood-thirsty Ustasha members who would once again butcher and cremate Serbs" <sup>28</sup>. The fact that members of Adzic's family were killed in World War II by the Ustasha provides some foundation for his hostility toward Croatian nationalism. Indeed, 40 members of the General's family were killed in January 1942 when the Ustasha raided the village of Pridvorica. <sup>29</sup> However, the General does not picture himself as a Serbian extremist but a loyal Yugoslav, trying to avoid the very dismemberment which set off communal bloodshed a half century ago. In a long interview with the Sarajevo newspaper *Oslobodjenje*, the General recently stated that the YPA has the basic task of preventing wider inter-ethnic clashes and civil war, and to create the time and conditions for true democratic solutions to overcome the Yugoslav crisis. He also stated that he was sure that Yugoslavia would continue to exist, although perhaps not with all its peoples and with the same territory and borders. <sup>30</sup>

In May 1991, Croatian and Slovenian nationalists responded to Kadijevic's ultimatum as a threat directed against their sovereignty and independence, and Croatian leaders stated that they considered the military "enemy number one in Croatia." Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina used cars and other vehicles to block roads to hinder tank movements. The military claimed that their movements in Bosnia were "routine." Crowds in the Dalmatian town of Sibenik demanded the resignation of army Chief of Staff General Adzic and chanted "we want weapons." In Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, protesters continued to demand that local recruits do their military service in Macedonia. By the end of the month the collective presidency was in crisis when Serbia and its allies refused to accept the normal rotation of the office from the Serb Borisav Jovic to the Croat Stipe Mesic. Although finally resolved, this manifestation of distrust and ill will was only another towards disintegration of the SFRY.

On June 25, 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence; two days later the YPA attempted a limited intervention to retake customs stations and the airport in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, but proved ineffective in the face of Slovene militia using partisan warfare. The YPA continued to defend itself in the press against charges that it was an occupation force, stating that it was preserving the territorial and constitutional integrity of the SFRY and had been forced to act because of "hatred, terror, and extremely inhumane actions" directed against it by the Slovenian Government and forces. <sup>31</sup> A nasty stalemate with YPA units trapped deep in Slovenia threatened to escalate from a battle of nerves into heavy fighting. Worse still, the mobilization and deployment of forces against Slovenia broke the YPA. Croatian and Slovene officers, soldiers and reservists refused to serve. On July 5, 1991, in a speech to newly appointed commanders at the Military Academy's Center in Belgrade, General Adzic declared:

[The] YPA is in a war imposed on it by the secessionists of Slovenia and Croatia, unscrupulously determined to crash the foundations of Yugoslavia, all of the achievements of socialist development within the Yugoslav community, as well as the interests of all Yugoslav nations.

General Adzic also warned officers, mostly Serbs and Montenegrins, not to embrace the tempting slogan of "All Serbs united in one state," and that the only battle for the YPA is the battle for Yugoslavia. <sup>32</sup> Three days earlier he had addressed the nation and declared:

There has been betrayal in our ranks, mostly among the Slovenes. This is not a small betrayal. A few people have even surrendered whole units. They wished for the repetition of 1941 [i.e., the dismemberment of the Yugoslav state following the German invasion]. <sup>33</sup>

Intervention of the EC and pressure from the international community after several false starts led to a solution. On July 7 a compromise agreement between the federal government and Slovenia was worked out at Brioni. The agreement left the border posts and airport in Slovenian hands and called for the return of YPA units to their barracks. At the same time Slovenia agreed to a three-month suspension of its declaration of independence. The EC agreed to provide a small detachment of observers to monitor the implementation of the agreement. After a number of false starts, the Brioni Agreement was finally implemented when the collective presidency on July 18 agreed to the gradual withdrawal of the YPA from Slovenia over the next three months. <sup>34</sup>

### ***THE SERBIAN INSURRECTION IN CROATIA***

As this element of the Yugoslav crisis was being defused, its sparks set in motion the main conflagration. On June 28, 1991, the anniversary of Medieval Serbia's defeat by the Ottomans, Serbian leaders of Krajina announced that the region would merge with the Municipal Community of Bosanska Krajina, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to form a greater Serbian community. <sup>35</sup> Shortly thereafter, simmering ethnic tensions inside Croatia exploded into open fighting in Krajina and Slavonia, with Serbian irregulars gaining the upper hand.

In that fighting Croatian authorities have repeatedly charged that the YPA is aiding Serbian irregulars. <sup>36</sup> By bombarding Croatian settlements with mortar fire during the night and then attacking police stations and strong points, the Serbs were able to demoralize the Croatian civilian population and outmaneuver Croatian defenders. On July 25 Austrian TV reported that federal forces had shelled Croatian national guardsmen in Erdut on the Croatian-Serbian border. YPA tanks were firing from the Serbian side of the line. <sup>37</sup>

### ***CONCLUSION***

The seriousness of this situation has been reflected in the Yugoslav press. On July 22 a Belgrade daily declared that "Yugoslavia has for all intents and purposes already disintegrated, even before all its republics make this act formal." The paper pointed out that the "price paid for the political insanity" is not only reflected by the bloodshed but also in the "total collapse of the Yugoslav economy." On July 23 the daily commented on the failed Yugoslav summit talks in Ohrid saying that because "there is no good will in some [politicians]...every talk ends where it started." <sup>38</sup> The fighting in Slovenia and Croatia has worsened a desperate economic situation.

This crisis prompted another round of EC and CSCE attempts to end the violence and resolve the Yugoslav crisis. Germany, which had played a leading role in resolving the Slovenian crisis, has led these efforts. In the fighting over redrawing internal boundaries of Yugoslavia, demands for a Greater Serbia and the support of the Milosevic government in Belgrade for the Serbian irregulars in Krajina and Slavonia have made either the maintenance of the SFRY or its transformation into a confederal state seem more remote. In the face of Serbian military



successes, the Croatian government has been forced to compromise, offering autonomy to its Serbian minority enclaves.<sup>39</sup> The YPA's open identification with the efforts of Serbian insurgents in Croatia to seize territory has made clear the shift in its position. This situation has, in turn, led to an explicit identification of the YPA with "Serbian imperialism" by some European spokesmen.<sup>40</sup>

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32. "Held at the Military Academy's Center, Belgrade, July 5, 1991 at 1 pm" [English translation supplied by the Slovenian Information Office, Washington, D.C.][BACK](#)
33. Blagoje Adzic, "Izjava General-pukovnika Blagoja Adzica, clana Staba Vrhovne komande" [Statement by Colonel General Blagoje Adzic, member of the Staff of the Supreme Command], Narodna armija (6 July 1991), p. 2.[BACK](#)
34. Patrick Moore, "Breakthrough in Slovenian Crisis," RFE/RL Daily Report, No. 136, 19 July 1991.[BACK](#)
35. Milan Andrejevich, "Hard Times Ahead for Croatia and Slovenia," RFE/RL Report on Eastern Europe, July 31, 1991.[BACK](#)
36. Patrick Moore, "Fighting Continues in Eastern Slavonia," RFE/RL Daily Report, No. 134, 17 July 1991.[BACK](#)

37. Patrick Moore, "Yugoslav Army Shells Croatian Positions," RFE/RL Daily Report, No. 141, 26 July 1991.[BACK](#)

38. Milan Andrejevich, "Yugoslavia Has 'Disintegrated'," RFE/RL Daily Report, No. 139, 24 July 1991.[BACK](#)

39. As this essay is being written, another cease fire has been put into place, thanks to EC pressure upon Serbia. But it remains to be seen whether the outcome will be a political compromise or a renewal of violence. In either case the YPA has been transformed by the events of the last year. It no longer possesses a monopoly on the means of violence in Yugoslavia and it can only regain that monopoly through a constitutional transformation into a different army or by force of arms.[BACK](#)

40. Josef Joffe, "History Repeats, Europe Forgets," New York Times, (August 28, 1991).[BACK](#)