

The Washington Times

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Letters to the editor

Published June 13, 2006

Yugoslavia, then and now

Jeffrey T. Kuhner observes that Yugoslavia is dead ("Yugoslavia, rest in peace," Commentary, Thursday). Actually, Yugoslavia was stillborn. Even as it was being cobbled together as part of post-World War I peacemaking, Croats (and other nationalities) resented Belgrade's domination. Stjepan Radic of the Croatian Peasant Party was interned for petitioning the peace conference for Croatian autonomy and later was shot in parliament.

Yugoslavia was part of a far larger drama and tragedy that unfolded in 1920. By creating an unworkable European order, the peacemakers following "the war to end all wars" actually laid the groundwork for a greater conflagration 19 years later. In the process, they dismembered Hungary to mint new multiethnic entities — Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia — and to greatly enlarge Romania with territory that included a significant number of minorities.

The peacemakers, some motivated by vengeance, were ignorant or ignored the region's history. By drawing artificial borders and transferring more than 3 million indigenous ethnic Hungarians and more than 70 percent of the country's territory to foreign rule, they violated the very principle of self-determination they invoked to rearrange Europe, and they truncated a state that had been a self-contained, geographically and economically coherent formation in Central Europe that boasted one of the longest-lasting historical borders in Europe.

This European order, reimposed in the 1947 Paris peace treaty, collapsed at the end of the Cold War. Ethnic groups throughout the region, with the exception of the Hungarians, realized their objectives to exercise self-determination. Over Western objections against secession, Slovenians, Croats, Macedonians and Albanians declared their independence. The Montenegrins also have embarked on that path. Kosovo, too, appears headed toward achieving either full autonomy or independence. Slovaks escaped Prague's perceived dominance in the divorce of 1993, ignoring the status of the compact Hungarian community living in southern Slovakia.

The Hungarian communities living as minorities in several of these newly divided post-Cold War states do not fully enjoy the benefits of the rearranged Europe. Their very identity is threatened, as they are denied a range of minority rights. For example, the Romanian government refuses to restore the Hungarian-language university in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár) that was eliminated by the communists. Hungarians of Vojvodina, a province of Serbia that historically had never been part of that country, face mounting pressure from extremist Serbs.

The Hungarian minorities have democratically expressed their aspirations to be free from

discrimination and intolerance and to be granted various forms of autonomy. To date, their legitimate aspirations have been denied. The new states of the region ought to change course by promoting enlightened minority policies that would advance both genuine democracy and stability. Then, states such as Yugoslavia will not have to be buried; rather, cultures will be able to flourish.

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