

Yugoslavia heads for dismemberment

by Konstantin George

A fatal mix provided by the economic effects of the Gulf crisis and a resurgent Greater Serbian chauvinism in Yugoslavia has created the potential for local wars and superpower outside military interventions in the Balkans, known traditionally as the powder keg of Europe.

Yugoslavia was already in the throes of economic collapse marked by the ruin of living standards through hyperinflation and mass unemployment. Economic misery, worst felt in the more backward eastern half of the country, dominated by Serbia, has been exploited by Serbian demagogues, led by Serbia's President, Slobodan Milosevic. A Serbian chauvinist mass movement has been formed within Serbia and among the hundreds of thousands of Serbs who comprise large minorities in the central republic of Bosnia and the western republic of Croatia. The movement's platform is to redraw the Yugoslav map to create a Greater Serbia "uniting all Serbs" under one rule.

The \$2 billion in added costs deriving from the Persian Gulf upheaval for the remainder of 1990 alone, has taken away the last hopes for politically containing the inter-ethnic conflict, and opened the final phase of Yugoslavia's dismemberment.

On Oct. 1 an armed revolt was launched by the 600,000-strong Serbian minority which makes up 12% of Croatia's population, against Croatia's first non-Communist, democratically elected government. Concentrated in Croatia's Knin region, armed Serbs have set up barricades, blocking road and rail traffic, and declared their autonomy. The Serbian minority announced that should Croatia try either to suppress this "autonomy," or move either toward independence or toward becoming a loosely affiliated confederated member of Yugoslavia, then the Serbian minority would secede from Croatia and join a Greater Serbia.

In a carefully scripted move, Croatia's Serbian minority "appealed" to Serbia and to Yugoslav President Borislav Jovic, himself a Serb, "to take steps to stop the repression in Croatia." Serbia's response arrived within hours, in the form of a declaration by Milosevic: "The Presidency of Serbia demands that the Yugoslav Presidency take urgent measures for the federal organs to perform their constitutional duty. The Serbian Presidency demands that the Yugoslav Presidency protect Yugoslav citizens of Serbian nationality from the repression which they are exposed to in Croatia."

No "repression" of any sort had occurred in Croatia—

not even normal police action against what was clearly armed insurgency. The Croatian government was only too aware that any move by Croatian police to crush the Knin disturbances would be seized upon as the pretext for sending the Serbian-controlled Yugoslav Army into Croatia. Croatia's government warned on Oct. 1: "This [Serbian declaration] is very serious. It is a request for military intervention. Up until now, the Army has steered clear."

Only three days earlier, Sept. 28, the Yugoslav Army leadership had threatened to intervene against Croatia's western republic neighbor and ally, Slovenia, after Slovenia had defied Belgrade and assumed control over its territorial defense forces.

The stage for even greater troubles is already set for November, when elections will be held in the central republic of Bosnia. There, the majority of Slavic Muslims has announced that they intend to draw Bosnia into cooperation with Croatia and Slovenia. Leaders of Bosnia's large Serbian minority (one-third of the population) have announced that if they are not included in the next Bosnian government (knowing full well they will not be, given their platform of annexing Bosnia to Serbia), they will ally with Serbia to either detach the Serb regions from Bosnia, or have Serbia annex Bosnia.

Once before in this century, Serbian attempts to annex Bosnia had fateful consequences, with the June 28, 1914 assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, which triggered World War I.

Bulgaria unstable

Most worrisome is that the unfolding Balkans crisis is not confined to Yugoslavia. The economic effects of the Anglo-American-caused Gulf upheaval have also sealed a death warrant for the physical economy of neighboring Bulgaria. While Western media have not run the alarmist headlines that the situation warrants, Bulgaria already by September had plunged into the worst socio-economic crisis of its modern history. Going into October, i.e., during and after the harvest, supplies of basic foods and other consumer essentials were worse than even during the war.

On Sept. 24, Bulgaria's President Zhelyu Zhelyev ordered a total ban on food exports. On Sept. 1, the most draconian food rationing in Bulgaria's history was imposed. The food supply in shops in the capital Sofia and other cities, is worse even than in the Soviet Union. Totally nonexistent are meat of any kind, cooking oil, sugar, flour, soap, and matches. Things will get more desperate as winter nears. The Bulgarian government estimates that 70% of the harvest entered the black market, thus ensuring empty shops for months to come.

How long Bulgaria's fledgling system of "parliamentary democracy" can survive this crisis is very uncertain. The conditions are there, sometime during the starvation winter, for an Army coup and the emergence of a strongman regime.