The Breakup Of Yugoslavia

Ethnic conflict plagued Yugoslavia. This country, formed after World War I, had eight major ethnic groups—Serbs, Croats, Muslims, Slovenes, Macedonians, Albanians, Hungarians, and Montenegrins. Ethnic and religious differences dating back centuries caused these groups to view one another with suspicion. After World War II, Yugoslavia became a federation of six republics. Each republic had a mixed population.

A Bloody Breakup Josip Tito, who led Yugoslavia from 1945 to 1980, held the country together. After Tito’s death, ethnic resentments boiled over. Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic (mee-LOH-sheh-vihch) asserted leadership over Yugoslavia. Many Serbs opposed Milosevic and his policies and fled the country.

Two republics, Slovenia and Croatia, declared independence. In June 1991, the Serbian-led Yugoslav army invaded both republics. After months of bloody fighting, both republics freed themselves from Serbian rule. Early in 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina joined Slovenia and Croatia in declaring independence. (In April, Serbia and Montenegro formed a new Yugoslavia.) Bosnia’s population included Muslims (44 percent), Serbs (31 percent), and Croats (17 percent). While Bosnia’s Muslims and Croats backed independence, Bosnian Serbs strongly opposed it. Supported by Serbia, the Bosnian Serbs launched a war in March 1992. During the war, Serbian military forces used violence and forced migration against Bosnian Muslims living in Serb-held lands. Called ethnic cleansing, this policy was intended to rid Bosnia of its Muslim population. By 1995, the Serbian military controlled 70 percent of Bosnia. In December of that year, leaders of the three factions involved in the war signed a UN- and U.S.-brokered peace treaty. In September 1996, Bosnians elected a three-person presidency, one leader from each ethnic group. By 2001, Bosnia and Herzegovina began to stand on its own without as much need for supervision by the international community.

Rebellion in Kosovo The Balkans descended into violence and bloodshed again in 1998, this time in Kosovo, a province in southern Serbia made up almost entirely of ethnic Albanians. As an independence movement in Kosovo grew increasingly violent, Serbian military forces invaded the province and fought back with a harsh hand. In response to growing reports of atrocities—and the failure of diplomacy to bring peace—NATO began a bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999. After enduring more than two months of sustained bombing, Yugoslav leaders finally withdrew their troops from Kosovo.

The Region Faces Its Problems In the early years of the 21st century, there were conflicting signs in Yugoslavia. Slobodan Milosevic was extradited to stand trial for war crimes. A large portion of the country’s foreign debt was erased. Despite an independence movement in Kosovo, parliamentary elections under UN supervision took place in November 2001 without violence.

And in Montenegro (which together with Serbia made up Yugoslavia), an independence movement seemed to lack support from the people as well as from the international community. Nonetheless, in February 2003, Yugoslavia’s parliament voted to replace what remained of the federation with a loose union of Serbia and Montenegro. Outright independence for each could come as early as 2006. However, problems remained, as indicated by the assassination of the Serbian prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, in March 2003.

The nations of Central and Eastern Europe made many gains in the early years of the 21st century. Even so, they continued to face serious obstacles to democracy. Resolving ethnic conflicts remained crucial, as did economic progress. If the nations of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union can improve their standard of living, democracy may have a better chance to grow. Meanwhile, economic reforms in Communist China sparked demands for political reforms, as you will read in the next section.