

## Nationalism and War

Sid Townsley suggested that today I should look at the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the horrors which have attended this. Here were ordinary decent people engaging in extraordinary violence, often against members of their own families. I took up Sid's challenge since the problem fit well into a problem which has bothered me for many years. I had been B-52-qualified to drop nuclear weapons on innocents and had been called out of classroom to rejoin an activated USAF reserve squadron that would have had the mission of parachuting the 82nd Airborne onto Cuba. When I think back on this I am struck by the ease by which it seemed so natural for me to be implicated in what I now look on in horror. Something seems natural, I think, if it is "the way things are done." But we never ask, why are things done this way? What is the origin and ground of such practices and the beliefs which sustain them? Years later in a book entitled *War and Democracy* (which evidently Sid Townsley found of some interest), I tried, in broad historical terms, to explore what some of these beliefs were and their source and origin. I will appeal to some of these ideas today.

But the problem of Yugoslavia was also especially graphic since Manfred Henningsen of the Political Science Department and I had attended a conference in Budva (Montenegro) in May of 1991, just weeks before Serbs, Slovenes and Croats began to slaughter one another.

Manfred and I both had known Mihailo Marcovic, once a prominent dissident philosopher and more lately the right-hand man of Mr. Milosevic. Just prior to our departure to Germany from Belgrade, Manfred and I had spent a lovely evening in Mihailo's home conversing about the past and future of the place then called "Yugoslavia." Both Mihailo and his wife had fought with the Partisans against the Nazis, both had been deeply engaged in the plans for the new Yugoslavia under Tito, both were strong democrats who had risked their lives as dissidents. Taken together, the discussions and conversations which we had in Yugoslavia had left us confident that the difficulties, political and economic, then being experienced in Yugoslavia could be overcome. I was confident that some sort of reconstituted Federation of Republics with a strong worker controlled, market socialism could be developed.

We know what happened. How was it possible? It is not likely that any sort of adequate explanation can be given, but drawing on my argument in *War and Democracy*, I will try, with my limited time and intelligence to try to shed some light on these quite remarkable phenomena. I concentrate on three large ideas: the idea of the state, the idea of democracy and the idea of the nation. Moreover, I consider these conveniently in terms of two easily confused, but entirely different conditions: the condition of the ancient *polis*-world and the condition of the modern world. Seeing the difference should, I hope, shed some light on the assumptions of modern "warriors."

### **The World of the *Polis***

Begin with the *polis* world of Ancient Greece. Then, as now, one might identify oneself in terms of nation. But in the ancient world, including here the ancient Middle and Near East, there

were no large "nations" and surely no nation-states, an entirely modern idea. "Nations" (as in the Old Testament, for example) were "ethnic" groups who might share language, a common fictive progenitor and a particular set of religious practices. The Semites descended from Sem. Nations were ensembles of "extended families," local and provincial.

The "Greeks" were not then a nation. While they had much in common, including language, they were first of all, Plataeans, Leucadians, Athenians, Spartans, Thebans, Tegeans, Myceanaeans, Corinthians...and many, many more. Indeed, at the time of the Persian Wars, there were perhaps 1500 "nations" each organized as an autonomous *polis*. The *polis* form was not, of course, the only form of political organization then extant. An older form, the *ethnos*, was true of Macedonia and Epirus and of much of the Eastern Mediterranean. In an *ethnos*, the idea of a citizen (Greek: *politean*) had not yet emerged. And of course, there were empires. As Herodotus makes clear, the Empire of Persia, e.g., was comprised of many, many "nations:" Medes, Cissians, Hyrcanians, Assyrians, Bactrians, Arians, Partians--the list is very, very long. Sometimes forgotten, Rome began as a *polis* (in Cicero's Latin, *res publica*) and became an empire.

Of particular importance here is the fact that in the *polis* citizens ruled and only citizens fought and died in warfare. This was true as much of oligarchic Sparta as of democratic Athens. And ruled must be taken quite literally. Citizens were not "represented." When they voted, they voted not for "governors" but directly on policy, including a decision to go to war. Thus, the decision of the Spartiates to make war on Athens was decided by them just as the Athenian decision to invade Sicily was made publicly, by vote, after debate in the assembly of citizens. Indeed, we think of Athens as *the* democracy of the ancient world precisely because unlike Sparta or Corinth, under the pressure of war from Persia, it extended citizenship to poor farmers who could not afford to be hoplites, but who did serve on the 200 triremes built under the leadership of Themistocles, what Aristotle was to call *nautikos ochlos*--the maritime mob. Empires could man armies with mercenaries, professionals who were both foreigners and were paid to fight. Demosthenes, following on the loss of the *polis* autonomy to Philip of Macedon, laments the loss of "civic-mindedness" by the Greeks who "in former times" would invade the enemies' land with hoplites and citizen armies for four or five months only during the campaigning season" and then return home to tend to their fields and animals. Not only was war no longer to be the decision of those who would fight, but the character of war was also to change.

### **The Modern State and Citizen**

Machiavelli is the great prophet of the modern state, fit, as no entity ever had been, to carry on war. Machiavelli's main concern was securing the "liberty" and "security" of the body politic. For him, as for all the moderns who followed him, this was the primary imperative of politics. In its absence, all the possible goods of human life, family, work, art and leisure, were threatened. This is now thoroughly taken for granted by everybody. All must defend the state, since if it fails, all else fails.

Machiavelli's world, like ours, was not the *polis*-world. His was a world of global aggrandisement where the powerful states swallowed the weak and the stateless. Accordingly, his

model was not Sparta, but Rome. In a world of many incipient Romes each competing with one another for the ability to dominate those lacking the means, one must try to achieve a "great empire." Those who desire to preserve their freedom and security need to be populous, for without an abundance of citizens it is impossible to be powerful. This sets the problem of politics:

If...you wish to make a people numerous and warlike, so as to create a great empire, you have to constitute it in such a manner as will cause you more difficulty in managing it; and if you keep it small or unarmed, and you acquire other dominions, you will not be able to hold them, or you will become so feeble that you will fall prey to whoever attacks you (*Discourses*, I, 6).

Machiavelli saw that the men who fought must be "citizens," but here again, Imperial Rome would be his model. There, as today, to be a citizen meant only that one could claim rights--not, as in the *polis*, that one could participate in ruling. And he saw also that governing a large and "nationally" heterogeneous population created problems and especially if the citizens were to be armed. There was, however, no choice. The logic of modern politics was relentless. Conquer or be conquered.

Moreover, it was this set of problems which led Machiavelli to his better known views on the behavior of "the Prince." If it is the statesman's primary responsibility to secure and maintain the liberty and security of the body politic (*vivere civile*), then he is in a unique moral situation: he seeks the one end which justifies any means: When the act accuses him, the result should excuse him" (*accusanda il fatto, lo effecto lo scusi*). It is surely wrong for the ordinary citizen to murder or to cheat, but those with the responsibility for the safety of state are in a different and difficult moral position. Lying to one's countrymen and manipulating sentiment to save the state, illegally funding enemies of the state's enemies, assassination--all are "excused" when the independence and security of the state is at issue. Although it will be denied, it is easy to show, I think, that Machiavelli's advice is heeded by all modern governments. Indeed, it may be an inevitable consequence of the idea that the "liberty" and "security" of the state is the primary imperative of politics. (Jefferson's actions regarding Aaron Burr is an early instance in American history.)

Machiavelli left a huge legacy of assumptions which we take for granted; but we shall not yet understand the willingness of "citizens" to slaughter in the name of the "nation" until we look further.

### **The Nation as the Sovereign People**

Almost always ignored is the contribution of the Americans. It was the Americans who stumbled onto a remarkable solution to many of the problems of rule that had been analysed by Machiavelli. The idea of the sovereign people, invented by the Americans, obliterated the bifurcation of rulers and ruled and provided an entirely new basis for the legitimacy of decisions made by "governments"--a modern term for what is also an entirely modern idea.

The colonists had fought for Independence. The thirteen states (each in its original sense a sovereign entity) were united under the Articles of Confederation. When Madison and Hamilton

managed to get a convention convened in Philadelphia (after the failed Annapolis meeting), the group of "founders" decided, extra-legally, to scrap their mandate to amend the Articles. They would instead offer plans for a "national government." There were a number of huge problems. One of them regarded the authority of the proposed new government. Under the Articles, the Congress (the older name for an assembly of ambassadors from independent states), represented States, not individuals. Under the proposal, individuals in the several states would be accountable to legislation passed by the new Federal Government. As Patrick Henry well put the matter: "The question turns, sir, on that poor little thing---the expression, We the people, instead of the States of America." If indeed, the National government could legislate over individuals, then where was sovereignty located? From at least Bodin on, the sovereign held the final power in a state. The King was sovereign exactly in the sense that he could make laws and declare war. Where was sovereignty in this historically novel constitution?

The solution was at hand: If the people were sovereign, sense could be made of the whole system. Indeed, Madison saw clearly that if special conventions were convened to decide on ratification (again bypassing the existing law of the land), then, ratification could be understood as "a WHOLE PEOPLE exercising its first and greatest power--performing an act of SOVEREIGNTY, ORIGINAL, and UNLIMITED."

Thereafter, "the people" could be sovereign even if they did not rule; and democracy could be redefined not as government *by* the people, but as government *of* and *for* the people. As Madison rightly put the matter (in his usually unread *Federalist Paper, No. 63*), "The true distinction between [earlier republics] and the American Government lies in *the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity* from any share [in the American System] and not in *the total exclusion of the representatives of the people* in [former Republics]. That is, in the ancient republic (Greek: *polis*), citizens had a real share in ruling--including, as I noted, in the decision to go to war. In the modern republic this would no longer be the case. Because authority "derived from" the sovereign people, governments could decide to make war just as they could make laws. Machiavelli, indeed, would have been impressed. But of course, this did not make it impossible that what was in the interest of the "sovereign people" was not necessarily in the interest of those who constituted its membership.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Nation-State**

The final piece of this historical tapestry--the idea of the nation-state--was even easier. Benedict Anderson has well summarized matters:

Out of the American welter came these imagined realities: nation-states, republican institutions, common citizenships, popular sovereignty, national flags and anthems, etc. and the liquidation of their conceptual opposites: dynastic empires, monarchical institutions, absolutisms, subjecthoods, inherited nobilities, serfdoms, ghettos, and so forth (*Imagined Community*, p. 78).

The idea of a nation-state, like the idea of the large modern state, once created, could not be

stopped. Imported to Europe and in the environment created by the French "citizen" armies of "liberation," the sovereign people became "the nation;" modern nationalism was born. This meant not only that one could identify with this new imagined community--and die for it, but that "nations" could be thought of as persons. They could have wills, interests and goals whose realization depended on those who would "lead" the nation.

What is most remarkable, perhaps, is how very recent this ensemble of ideas is and yet how powerful they are. Without them, it would be quite impossible, I think, to understand the mutual massacre of millions--including many who were committed to the cosmopolitan ideas of international socialism-- in World War I, and more generally how it is possible that otherwise intelligent people quite willingly march off to faraway places to do and suffer violence in the name of abstractions like "freedom" or "security" or "democracy." Never asked are the questions: Whose freedom? Whose Security? What democracy? But there is a deep paradox to all of this. On the one hand, while patriotism can make killers of decent people, "nations" are remarkably open to construction and re-construction.

As Anderson argues, the modern idea of a nation--a nation-state--is an imagined community, a social construction from historical materials at hand. Not everything can be allowed, but the historical materials are stunningly flexible and nothing, it seems, is absolutely essential: neither "genealogy," nor language, nor religion, nor culture.

The first of the modern states had an obvious advantage, for while they were by no means comprised of homogeneous populations, they could use state power to imagine a nation coincident with the existing boundaries of their states. After two or three generations--not more seems to have been needed-- the condition could seem entirely "natural." States that were created out of the wreckage of the great multinational empires, the Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian and later, with the end of overseas colonialisms, the new states of Africa and Asia, had also to create nations, generally from historical materials which stubbornly resisted this imagining. Yugoslavia, of course, is a case example. But the disasters of most of the states of Africa and many of those of Asia fall into the same pattern.

It was also an American, Woodrow Wilson, who, thoroughly taken by the idea of "self-determination," articulated the mad principle that state frontiers should coincide with the frontiers of nationality. The principle is mad not so much because the empires which collapsed could not be reorganized to satisfy the principle, but because, as a moment's reflection will show, it has no logical ending point: The "self" to be determining is not given but constructed. Because nations are neither God-given nor "natural kinds" like apples or swans, nations can only be political projects, both in terms of constructing political identities and in making good on claims of self-determination. As Gellner has noted, there can be no such thing as a world of "nations," "only a world (now quoting Hobsbawm) where some potentially national groups, in claiming this status, exclude others from making similar claims." Are the Hawaiians a nation? For some, yes, for others no. Who then is a member and why? I am not asking whether Hawai'i should be a nation or what being so would mean. That is a political question about which equally reasonable people

may disagree. (I think, in fact, that something like a nation within a nation would be very desirable.) And what of those "peoples" who do not evidently aspire to become nation-states: Inuit, Mapuche and Aymara (rain forests natives of South America), aboriginal Australians, Athabaskan Indians of the sub-Artic?

Worse, once a nation is defined and acquires statehood, systematic efforts to carry out the Wilsonian principle leads, logically, to "ethnic cleansing," the mass expulsion or extermination of "minorities" within "the nation." This result, of course, was not invented by the promoters of a Greater Serbia or a Greater Croatia. Perhaps this is also an American invention, when "Americans" expelled and exterminated the native inhabitants. It was, of course, the fate of all those peoples who, unable to conquer, were conquered, and thus either were "assimilated" or eliminated. The Wilsonian principle was, later, the principle underlying the annihilation of Armenians by Turks in 1915, the expulsion of a million and half Greeks from regions of Asia major where they had lived since the time of Homer, and of course, it was the principle motivating the genocidal policies of the Nazis. Indeed, we need to remind ourselves that we can be grateful that the Wilsonian principle is not always pressed: no modern state ever was nor is now comprised of a homogeneous population.

### **Yugoslavia**

At the turn of century, what became Yugoslavia was part of the Habsburg Empire. Croatia (whose territory also included Slavonia) had then its own Diet and aspirations for an independent state which would have included Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serbia was part of the Ottoman Empire, but leading parties in Serbia and Croatia organized a coalition aimed at becoming part of a reconstituted Triune Kingdom. The motivating ideas derived from the earlier Illyrian movement which held that "Croats and Serbs are one people" (Quoted in Jelavich, p. 69). The roots of this were partly linguistic. Croats had spoken three mutually intelligible dialects of which one, Stokavian, was also a major dialect of the Serbs. The Croat "apostle of Illyrianism, Gaj (1809-1972) though a native speaker of Kajkavian Croat switched to stokavian in 1838, "in order to underline the basic unity of southern slavs." According to Hobsbawm, this would ensure that "Serbo-Croat developed more or less as one literary language (though written in Roman characters by the Catholic Croats, in Cyrillic ones by the Orthodox Serbs") and that Croat nationalism would be deprived of "the convenient linguistic justification..." (Hobsbawm, p. 55). It is not merely of passing interest to note here that the first efforts at "cleansing" to be taken up by the new "nations" of former Yugoslavia was linguistic. As Jasha Levinger writes, "although all groups spoke a common language with variations so slight that they could even qualify as dialects, politicians and the media have introduced new words and expressions designed to emphasize ethnicity and promote partisanship. Indeed, this heightening sensitivity to linguistic variation "has turned everyday communication into an obligatory broadcast of the speaker's own ethnicity and an occasion to identify with or reject that of the listener" (p. 229).

Following, then, the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, there were huge differences in the interests and allegiances of the regimes in power. We may infer, I think, that for most ordinary people, most of these differences were quite irrelevant. After considerable diplomatic struggle, the

Serbia government in exile (on Corfu) agreed with the Yugoslav Committee to form a Yugoslav state, a constitutional monarchy under the Karadjordjevic dynasty (Serbian). The preamble stated that "the Croats, Serbs and Slovenes were one people: 'the same by blood, by language, both spoken and written" (quoted by Jelavich, p. 146). Strikingly, the document referred only to these three "peoples." Macedonians, Montenegrins, Albanians, Bosnian Muslims, Hungarians and Germans then residing in these territories were not considered separately. The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes became, formally, Yugoslavia, only in 1929, after King Alexander suspended the constitution and established a personal dictatorship. He seems to have made a strenuous effort to erase historic divisions that had nationalist associations--with, presumably, the explicit aim of creating a new nation. Jelavich concludes, however, that the measures taken "served to enhance Serbian domination" (p. 200f).

At the end of World War II, some 800,000 Partisans were in full control of Yugoslavia and an effective administrative structure was already in place (Jelavich, p. 295). In November 1945 a constitutional assembly met (following the pattern set by the Americans), and the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was proclaimed. The state was divided into six republics: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. Within Serbia two "autonomous" provinces were established: Kosovo, which had an Albanian majority, and Vojvodina, which was a mix of Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovak, and Ukrainian populations. All three major religious organizations: Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim continued to function, if under constraints common to Communist regimes.

Some recent writers, e.g. Michael Ignatief, while acknowledging that Tito--himself the product of a Croatian father and Slovenian mother-- well understood that some form of federalism was the best solution, given the history of the region, have, at the same time, asserted that "by failing to allow a plural political culture to mature, Tito ensured that the fall of his regime turned into the collapse of the entire state structure. In the ruins, his heirs and successors turned to the most atavistic principles of political mobilization in order to survive" (Ignatief, *Blood and Belonging*, p. 24).

We must agree that Tito's "heirs and successors turned to the most atavistic principles of political mobilization," but it is contestable history to suggest that it was the "fall of his regime" which *caused* the collapse of the entire state or that the political mobilization of atavism was a mechanism of "survival." In my mind, Ignatief is victim of unchallenged assumptions. Survival of what, for example? Surely not the survival of persons and their families nor of their taken-for-granted ways of life. Perhaps survival of the regimes in power, or of *their* atavistic notions of a Greater Serbia or an "independent" Croatia? Moreover, he fails to see what is most important. First, ordinary people remain subject to decisions made by regimes that may, but often do not, act in their interests. This is, of course, true of all modern states even if in some at least, the consequences are not nearly so disastrous as they have been in Yugoslavia--or in Africa, the Philippines, etc. As is now very clear, there is enough blame to go all around. If it was Serbia's Milosevic who, aspiring to a Greater Serbia, started the whole process of disintegration, we must refer to Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, whose army the US built so that he could engage in his

own massive "ethnic cleansing" as "our son of a bitch." And backed to the wall, the Bosnian government was happy to use Islamic fundamentalists who since have terrorized both non-Muslims and secular Bosnian Muslims. As Bogan Denitch rightly insisted, "victims are just that --victims. That does not necessarily make them good guys." (*Democratic Left*, January, 1996).

Second, given the construction of the modern nation state and given the environment of the international states system, it is always possible--indeed, it is likely-- that leaders of regimes will mobilize ordinary people in terms of "the most atavistic principles of political mobilization." We see it all the time, not just in the Balkans or Africa but in the US as well. Wherever there is scarcity and fear, there is the opportunity for politicians to exploit atavistic principles. These residues need not be "lived" or part of the collective conscience of people. But since all peoples have histories, different elements--genealogy (and pseudo-notions like "race"), religion, language, culture-- may be appealed to and made "real." Nothing is clearer than that such constructions have massive political efficacy.

The waiters and bellmen in Dubrovnik, the clerks in Belgrade's fashionable department stores, and the translators in Budva that we talked to in May of 1991 had both a shared and a different history--as is always the case. They wanted only to get on with their lives and to marry and raise their children. They had no say in the decisions made in Belgrade, Zagreb, Titograd. Nor surely did they of those made in Bonn or Washington. They *became* militant Serbs or Croats by drawing on materials which went back to the eleventh century and included the Nazi past. They had no desire to kill their relatives, to destroy their villages or their ways of making a livelihood. But they have done so. There but the grace of God go any of us.

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## Endnote

1. This may be as good a place as any comment on the work of my colleague, R.J. Rummel. He hopes to demonstrate that "democracies don't or rarely make war on each other" (*Death by Government*, p. 2). There were, he says, about 75 democracies in the world in 1993, about one fourth of the world's population. "Yet," he writes, we have had no war--none--among them. Nor is there any threat of war. They create an oasis of peace" (p. 2).

It would take a large essay to even begin to dismantle the remarkable assumptions made by Rummel, but they fall into two large categories, methodological and ideological. Methodologically, his approach (in contrast to mine) is absolutely ahistorical and positivist. Rummel anchors his argument on what he thinks is a powerful explanatory generalization: "The more power a government has, the more it can act arbitrarily according to the whims and desires of the elite, and the more it makes war on others and murders its foreign and domestic subjects" (p. 1f.) It follows, he thinks, that the absence of war between two democracies is explained on grounds that they are democracies: power is dispersed, decentralized, limited. But nothing of the sort can be inferred. For example, we might ask, as regards the wars he acknowledges, whether actions *by* democracies led to war, e.g., the policy encirclement by the Allied powers who intervened and promoted the Civil War in the new Soviet Union? Or consider the whole of US relations to Latin America? If there were no wars between the "democracies" of Latin America and the US might not this be best explained in terms of sheer overwhelming power? And surely Rummel knows that it has been easy to convince Americans that they should go to war, even when, as in World War I, or Vietnam or, more recently, as in the Persian Gulf, none of the interests of ordinary Americans were at stake.

Then there is the question of what shall be counted as "a democracy. Consider here that Adolph Hitler was elected in Weimar Germany. Of course, Nazi Germany was no democracy in any sense. Still, Rummel seems confident in that he knows what a democracy is. One gets the feeling that for Rummel, those who are like us are democracies, those who are not, are not.

I would argue almost the opposite of Rummel, that (putting aside the World War II), a considerable number of the wars of the 20th century were the result of capitalist democracies hellbent on securing their world hegemony against "communism." I would argue also that much of the democide was the consequence of conditions established by the continuous threat of invasion and domination by these powers. This began with the Allied intervention in the new Soviet Union.

Rummel acknowledges that "democracies" have committed democide, but says that this considerable amount of killing confirms his "Power Principle." "In each case," he writes, "the killing was carried out in a highly undemocratic fashion." But if so, his power principle is surely a tautology. I would readily grant that, as he says, that "power is a necessary cause for war or democide" (p. 20), but it is pure ideology to suggest that democratic regimes lack all the power they need to commit both war and democide or that they have never done so.

Rummel is, I think, trading on an argument, first developed by Kant: that republics will not make war because where the citizens are sovereign, it is not, generally, in their individual interests to make war. Kant and Rummel fail, however, to notice that even in democratic republics, power is in the hands of regimes, not the people. Citizens in democracies can, of course, vote out a scoundrel who brings a nation to war, but as been proved many, many times, it is then generally too late.