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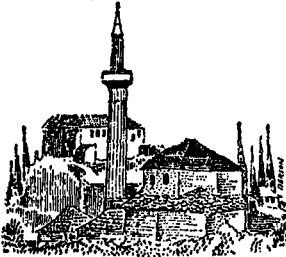
## EAST & WEST

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*Letter from Yugoslavia*

# Can Opposites Be Reconciled?

By Hans Heigert



THE AUTOPUT from Zagreb to Niš via Belgrade is reputedly the most dangerous highway in the world. Its ribbon of worn asphalt is fringed with the wrecks of articulated lorries and motor cars, many of them still smoking. Commonest cause of these accidents: driver-fatigue. The vehicles are *en route* from Denmark, Holland and Germany for Turkey, Iran, and heaven knows where else. Even at off-peak periods (touristically speaking) every minute brings more cars heading south with Central European number-plates and—often enough—mountains of baggage on their roof-racks. Piloting them are swarthy figures, manifestly Arabs of every oriental provenance; the road is a gigantic caravan route between West and East. For journeys in the opposite direction, many voyagers seem to favour air travel or, at a pinch, the good old Baghdad Railway and the Orient Express. Obviously, business is booming.

Even this is no novelty to these wide open Balkan spaces. They not only carried caravans plying between Europe and Asia for at least 2,000 years but have been trodden by the cohorts and regiments of every conceivable army. (Serbia did not benefit as a result, and its history has been marked by successive humiliations.) Leaving the arterial road and its through-traffic—the hackneyed term retains its validity here—one quickly enters a desolation of barren and interminable mountains. The scattered villages, though still locked in battle with mud or dust, show clear signs of rural building activity. Here and there one spies a primitive mine, a tiny workshop

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or a cattle market of the sort that has remained unchanged for generations. Less common, and found only at very wide intervals, are small Orthodox monasteries. These are not spacious precincts conveying an appearance of former wealth, but squat little churches closely jostled by modest outbuildings and surrounded by massive walls strangely thicker and taller than the buildings inside them.

One gains a sudden inkling of what has shaped the character of this Serbian people: endurance of foreign rule, resistance to foreign influence, latent rebellion. Cohesion was a laborious process and hard to maintain. The sole medium of national understanding throughout centuries of Turkish domination may ultimately have been the folk-song. The Serbs' plaintive melodies recall the singing of the Orthodox liturgy, and their folk-dances, very seldom wild or ecstatic, are always performed by a circle of friends with arms linked or draped round shoulders—yet another symbol of solidarity in the face of outsiders?

The Serbs claim that it was they who repeatedly tried to found an "independent South Slav state." This has not only made them a proud people but engendered an authoritarianism which provokes suspicion and dislike among their neighbours. A typical joke, which I heard several times on my journey: "Why are the Turks so backward? . . . Because they had to contend with the Serbs for 500 years!" But what of the others?

THE SLOVENES far away to the north have always felt more like Central Europeans and probably are so. The oppressed Croats were for ever partitioned under Venetian, Austrian, and Hungarian rule, though the characteristics of their oppressors and their own natural assets helped them to become genial in temperament and, above all, good businessmen. Only in Dalmatia's Dubrovnik does pride persist in a rich history of independence and mature statecraft. The Montenegrins, further south, were the only Slav people in the Balkans to defy conquest by the Turks, managing to remain free for centuries in their wild mountain preserves, satisfying their needs by an occasional raid on the Sultan's caravans. Montenegrin unity was thus based on the rules of war and a system of hierarchical authority, not on economic necessities. By contrast, the Macedonians in the extreme south of modern Yugoslavia remained under Turkish rule until the present century. This being so, they had little opportunity to develop a sense of nationhood or to organise even the simplest form of self-government. A touch of melancholy seems uppermost in their nature.

Finally, the Bosnians of the central mountains—or do they exist at all? Are they really just a mixture of Croats and Serbs? Questions like these sound presumptuous and disparaging. What is certainly true is that this region of dense forests always tended to be remote and forgotten, with a backwoods reputation. Many of the inhabitants of Sarajevo were more or less forcibly converted to the Mohammedan faith, and so much that went on there proceeded fatalistically.

Far from finding himself in the oriental paradise of the travel brochures, however, anyone visiting Sarajevo these days will discover it to be an industrial city veiled in stinking smog. The vapour-shrouded basin in which it lies is encircled to an altitude of 6,000 feet and for 20 miles around with week-end retreats and holiday homes—socialism *à la* Bosnia, but also indicative of fast-growing prosperity and changing attitudes.

But all such Balkan generalisations must be made with care. This is a highly sensitive country, unable to cope with West European ironies and easily provoked. The grand gesture still reigns here, as does hospitality of an exceptional order: the “great Slav soul” aspires to be indulgent, humane, not always committed to the logic and rigour of the prevailing system. Only those who have attended schools and universities in the West can be heard savagely and angrily inveighing against “nepotism . . . laxity . . . corruption” and the hectic “craze for self-enrichment.” This is not at all Tito’s tone in self-criticism. Instead, he adopts an understanding paternalism when enumerating so-called abuses. As he recently declared with fatherly severity, it is so hard to abolish, or even control, selfishness and the “illegitimate accumulation of capital” when everyone after all wants to help his friends and nobody wants to hurt anybody.

How, THEN, does it hold together at all, this State which so carefully avoids being regarded as the embodiment of a Nation? The Yugoslavs I talked with on this visit produced two conflicting but equally simple answers to this question. Both are as wrong as anything about this country that tries to explain it “simply”. The first answer runs: “The State doesn’t cohere at all—come tomorrow, they’ll all be at each other’s throats.” The second: “This is a Communist dictatorship—the Party governs by employing subtle methods of intimidation or, if necessary, bare-faced terror.” Neither alternative can be dismissed, but it is more probable that what is somehow specifically Yugoslav will survive. What they refer to as their “own road” is anything but a mere form of words.

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THE YUGOSLAVS are engaged in something quite exceptional: a sensitively planned "Federalism" that seems wholly at odds with experience and necessity; a system of "Worker Self-management" of the sort that figures in the Communist picture-book but has never evolved viably anywhere; and a "Rotation principle" for all senior personnel which would make any anti-authoritarian heart beat higher, if only it worked. There is but one adjective that conveys something of the ideas behind this system: "sophisticated", *i.e.* abstract, scientifically worked

out, and designed for an exceptionally well-educated and highly moral citizenry. These ideas presuppose not only that there are adequate numbers of people capable of implementing them (a controversial point even among Yugoslav Communists) but, even more, that they are genuinely compatible with "human nature", or known forms of human behaviour.

YUGOSLAVIA'S FEDERALISM seems quite impractical from the large perspective of State administration. The Republics constitute the

### The Popovic Case:

**S**RDJA POPOVIC is a Yugoslav lawyer who was charged with "spreading false news." The unique quality of the case (there is of course nothing unique, in tyrannies like Yugoslavia, about people being charged with such spurious offences when they have said or done something even mildly critical of the regime) is provided by the fact that Mr Popovic was prosecuted for what he said, in his role as counsel for the defence, in an earlier political "show trial."

This was of a prominent Yugoslav writer, poet and philosopher, Dragoljub Ignjatovic, who had had the temerity, at an academic seminar, to tell a tiny part of the truth about the condition to which three decades of Tito's dictatorship has reduced the Yugoslav people. Mr Ignjatovic spoke of

a backward agriculture, an industry which cannot compete . . . low productivity which is growing lower and lower, inflation, a poor and disorganised health service . . . mass illiteracy, unemployment . . . lies as the only form of communication, a counterfeit information service. . . .

He also gave something of the political background to these conditions:

. . . the bureaucracy in power, having no support and so being afraid of everything, reacts nervously to any sound of life . . . allowing freedom of thought and creativity only to those of feeble creative powers and to the apologists . . . the tendency to transform and extend the mostly peasant national liberation movement into a social revolution (. . . economic and political equality . . . free election) is completely annulled . . . the evil must be resisted . . . this is neither capitalism nor socialism. It is semi-barbarism. . . .

For saying these things, Mr Ignjatovic was sentenced, last October, to three-and-a-half years' imprisonment.

THE CASE had aroused widespread protests, not only in the world outside (he was adopted as a "prisoner of conscience" by Amnesty, for instance), but even in Yugoslavia, where the Writers' Union took up his case. Realising that the affair was becoming a considerable source of embarrassment, the Yugoslav authorities hastily released Mr Ignjatovic, claiming that they were doing so on grounds of ill-health

(something they have refused to do in less embarrassing cases even when their victims are very seriously ill, as is Mihajlo Mihajlov, who is still in jail for criticising Tito). But in the course of the Ignjatovic "trial", Mr Popovic, whom Ignjatovic had engaged because the lawyer has a long and outstandingly courageous record of willingness to defend Yugoslavia's political victims, had said and done things which looked likely to cause Tito and his regime a great deal more embarrassment than any outcry from the West.

In his defence of Ignjatovic, Mr Popovic carefully separated, in considering the words that had provoked the charges, the factual statements from the opinions. Under Yugoslav law (ignored by the regime, of course) the defendant had the right to express the opinions, and as for the facts—about the economic situation, the health service, illiteracy and unemployment, &c—Mr Popovic's defence produced one of those farcical situations inseparable from the administration of what passes for justice in a communist country. He explains what happened:

The facts, I thought, should be proved false by the prosecution, and since the prosecution failed even to try to prove that these facts are false Mr Ignjatovic and myself asked the court to obtain official reports from the state administration . . . the request was refused, on the grounds that these facts are more or less generally known to be true. [My italics].

MR POPOVIC, for his record as defence counsel in many of Yugoslavia's political show trials, had long been a marked man, and the regime now moved against him, with the pretext that, in trying to establish in the course of the trial that Mr Ignjatovic's facts were true, he had himself been guilty of "spreading false rumours." Such a prosecution (a verdict of guilty would obviously be arranged in advance) would have a double effect; it would remove Mr Popovic himself from the scene (a prison sentence would automatically involve his disbarment), and would powerfully intimidate any other lawyers who might be considering defending the regime's political victims. (Though one, at least, remained undeterred, for Mr Popovic managed to find a lawyer willing to defend him.)