

The Yugoslav conflict

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Although the break-up of the Soviet Union took place relatively smoothly, the fragmentation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia led to years of extremely bitter civil war, which was ended only by the intervention of Western powers.

The Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, proclaimed in 1945 by the Communist leader who was a symbol of the resistance against German troops, Tito (born Josip Broz; the name 'Tito' was adopted in 1934), comprised six Republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, and two autonomous provinces: Vojvodina and Kosovo. Tito had succeeded in maintaining this federal structure, despite antagonism between the different nationalities, through his authoritarian regime and the federal League of Communists, and by maintaining a balance between the Serbs and other ethnic groups. He had broken away from the Soviet Union in order to free himself of Stalin's control and, while he remained faithful to Communist ideology, he became one of the main representatives of the Non-Aligned Movement, thereby giving Yugoslavia great international prestige. After Tito's death in 1980, power was exercised by a collective presidency which had to cope with the deterioration of the economic situation (the failure of self-management Socialism) and, above all, the resurgence of interethnic conflict.

In 1989, Slobodan Milošević became President of the Republic of Serbia and confirmed his intention to create a 'Greater Serbia', encompassing the Serbian minorities of Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia. The autonomous status of Vojvodina and Kosovo within the Republic of Serbia was abolished. Although the Communist Party — which became the Socialist Party under Slobodan Milošević in 1989 — remained in power in Serbia and Montenegro, it severed its links with the federal League of Communists in Slovenia and Croatia in February 1990. In April, reformers gained the upper hand in Slovenia, and a non-Communist Government was formed in Croatia following free elections. In July, Slovenia adopted a declaration of sovereignty. In September, Kosovo proclaimed itself a Republic. In November, free elections in Bosnia saw the defeat of the Communists. In December, Croatia adopted a new constitution that conferred on it the right to secede, and the Slovenians voted for independence in a referendum. On 21 and 22 February 1991, the Slovenian and Croatian Parliaments proposed the 'dissociation' of the Federation into several sovereign and autonomous States.

Finally, on 25 June 1991, Croatia and Slovenia proclaimed their independence and their 'dissociation' from the Yugoslav Federation, a proclamation that was rejected by the Federal Parliament. On 27 June, the Federal Army, consisting mainly of Serbs, was ordered into Slovenia to take control of checkpoints on the Italian, Austrian and Hungarian borders. Violent conflict began. In Croatia, bloody confrontation took place between the Croatian police and Serb extremists, who were supported by the Federal army.