

My last Yugoslavia

Пише: Aleksa Djilas
уторак, 15 новембар 2011 19:02

“I solemnly pledge ... to protect and develop brotherhood and unity of our nations and nationalities...”

From the oath of allegiance taken by recruits upon enlistment in the Yugoslav People’s Army.



I was twenty-six, with a master’s degree in political science from London University, when I set out for my obligatory one-year military service in the Yugoslav People’s Army. I belonged to the class of recruits drafted in November 1978, which meant that our military training would take place mostly in winter. My destination was a garrison in Maribor, a town in northeastern Slovenia, and I quickly developed a fondness for its Central European mixture of architectural styles and pleasant restaurants with good food. Yet, because of developed industry, the pollution was even worse than in my native Belgrade where car fumes often clouded avenues.

After five months of military drill, often in windy fields or on hills covered with snow, we became border guards and my battalion (around six hundred men) was assigned precisely one hundred and one kilometers of Yugoslav-Austrian border. I say Yugoslav and not Slovene since Slovenia was at that time one of the six republics of federal Yugoslavia.

Slovenia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and in 2004 joined NATO and the European Union. No one either in uniform or in civilian clothes now patrols or in any way controls the Slovene-Austrian border – it can be crossed freely, at all places, without a passport. Yet Slovenes and Austrians do not feel close to each other. Indeed, there is probably more mutual antipathy now than when Slovenia was a part of Yugoslavia, whether pre-war royal or post-war communist. For Austria, though never fond of Yugoslavia, took it very seriously.

Austrian-Slovene economic cooperation is well developed but declarations of friendship by politicians still sound hollow. Austria has an overbearing attitude toward its much smaller neighbor, while Slovene governments avoid confrontation with Austria since this would put into question the Slovene national political orientation. After all, already in the mid-1980s, leading

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Slovene intellectuals openly declared that Slovenes were an integral part of a supposedly liberal and tolerant Central Europe and had nothing in common with the violent and primitive Balkans.

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The task of the border guard units of the Yugoslav People's Army was to be the first line of defense in case of war and to catch or, if necessary, shoot anyone who tried to cross the border illegally. My comrades-in-arms did not kill or wound anyone – thank God! – but they did catch some smugglers (a few turned out to be quite likeable) and also two or three people who might have been dangerous criminals. While patrolling the border I often felt silly. What were we doing there in full battle gear while on both sides of the border we saw only sleepy villages where civilians attended to their daily tasks? Was guarding the border really a job for the army, and a relatively large number of soldiers at that? It soon became clear to me that while doing our patriotic duty as soldiers, we border guards were also serving an authoritarian ideological one-party state which needed a military wall around the territory over which it ruled and wanted to show to the neighboring countries, and even more to the people inside Yugoslavia, that its power was all-encompassing.

What added to my general embarrassment was that the Austrian military did not patrol their side of the border at all, while just a few hundred meters from the border on the Yugoslav side, our army had erected a series of buildings spaced five to ten kilometers apart, each housing a platoon of soldiers whose only duty was patrolling. The Austrian army did not even have border guard units. So it looked like Yugoslavia was more afraid of Austria, a smaller and militarily weaker country, which was also neutral and a democracy, than Austria was of Yugoslavia. Occasionally a uniformed Austrian would pass by or pay a visit. "Finanz" was the term used to describe them and I concluded that they were customs officials working for the ministry of finance. It is my pleasure to report that a Yugoslav NCO and an Austrian "Finanz" would usually be on friendly terms and were even from time to time drinking companions.

There was, however, one potential threat at the border, which only military force could counter – the possibility of armed Yugoslav émigrés trying to enter the country. In 1972, seven years before I became a border guard, nineteen well-armed and well-trained Croatian fascists had entered Yugoslavia through the region we would later patrol. They aimed to start a Croatian national uprising and create an ethnically pure greater Croatia (which would include Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and parts of Serbia and Montenegro), but ended up killed or captured, in the very parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina where Croats formed a majority population. Yet this was not the end of their story. In 1990, Franjo Tudjman became president of Croatia and in 1991 Croatia declared independence. The Croatian-Serbian war broke out. Croatian authorities

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then rehabilitated this group and even honored its members as national heroes with monuments and street names.

My platoon's foremost task was precisely to combat any such terrorist Yugoslav group. We were based in Maribor, equipped with all-terrain military vehicles, and ready to rush to the spot on the border where terrorists would appear. However, was that really a task for us, poorly trained conscript soldiers, rather than for a special anti-terrorist unit?

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We border guards were armed with Kalashnikovs. The famous Soviet assault rifle AK-47 was produced in many countries and ours was made in a town in central Serbia. We had no idea that it was not an original Yugoslav design nor had we ever heard the name Kalashnikov. The official name of the Yugoslav Kalashnikov was assault rifle M70 but we called it an automatic rifle or more simply an automatic. The party-controlled media (needless to say, there was no other) never examined closely, let alone criticized, either our military or our armaments industries. They lavished formulaic praise on them but provided little genuine information, hiding from our citizens even facts that could obviously not be concealed from foreign journalists or diplomats, let alone intelligence agencies.

I remember seeing photographs in Yugoslav newspapers of soldiers and paramilitaries in the Middle East and Africa carrying what I believed were "our" Kalashnikovs. I wondered why so many countries wanted to buy them. Were they of such high quality? Or less expensive than others? Or both? And to a fellow soldier who had become a trusted friend, I said that it was morally wrong for President Tito and our government to sell weapons to bellicose dictators and terrorist guerilla groups. Now I know that our country produced very few of the Kalashnikovs I saw in the newspapers. However, it is true that Yugoslavia participated in the international arms trade and sometimes sold weapons to the vilest customers. Yet, many other countries, including many Western democracies, did the same. And still do.

Later I also learned that so-called small arms were mankind's premier weapons of mass destruction, killing hundreds of thousands of people every year, mostly civilians in ethnic conflicts. They would be the main killer (Kalashnikovs leading the way) in the wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration in the 1990s. And who knows in whose hands the Kalashnikov I carried ended up and what wicked deeds it performed.

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I hope not to be boasting when I say that I was not a substandard soldier in that gray-olive uniform. During the training period, I exerted myself even more than officers demanded. Like most of my friends in Belgrade's small democratic opposition circles, I believed that Yugoslavia needed powerful armed forces. I well remember conversations with my father, author and dissident Milovan Djilas, in which he censured as unpatriotic those young men who tried to avoid doing their military service.

Why did people with genuine liberal values support a strong military? Did we not believe in democracy, reject the one-party communist system and consider the president of Yugoslavia, Marshal Tito, the supreme commander of the Yugoslav People's Army, to be a dictator? Yes, we did. But above all we feared the Soviet Union. This was the main reason for our pro-military stance. Soviet leaders, we were convinced, had not given up ambitions from Stalin's times of getting Yugoslavia back into the Soviet block, even by force if the international situation allowed it (for example, if the United States showed weakness and irresolution). We knew that the Yugoslav People's Army could not resist for long the mighty forces of the Warsaw Pact. However, if it fought courageously and competently, the chances that the West would come to Yugoslavia's aid increased. So I convinced myself that being a soldier for twelve months was more than just an unpleasant waste of time.

Not a few of my comrades-in-arms had a bit of the Švejk in them. Like Jaroslav Hašek's "good soldier," they mocked army rules and regulations and feigned naïvety so that they could be irreverent towards officers. Above all, they were quick to notice the absurdity of a situation and even quicker to transform it into a truly ridiculous one. I found all that rather appealing but rarely joined in. After a few months, however, everything began to turn into a wearisome routine and I slowly began to adopt a lethargic minimalism. For example, while initially interested in the martial properties of my Kalashnikov – indeed, officers expected us to know them by heart – I ended up liking it mainly because it was light to carry and easy to clean.

Boredom became our main enemy and we began to count how many days we had until discharge. Some soldiers started carrying in their pockets a tailor's tape measure one hundred and fifty centimeters long, made of limp plastic. They would wait for the day which was one hundred and fiftieth until the end of service. Then in the evening they would cut off the centimeter with number 150 printed on it. And so they would continue at the end of each following day, marking its passage by cutting off one more centimeter – 149th, 148th, 147th,

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and so on. They used small sharp scissors and cut slowly and with great precision. It was a ritual. I shared their joy in watching the tapes grow shorter. For this was a visible refutation of what we all unconsciously feared most – that time was standing still.

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I had no instrument to force time to move. But it helped that I enjoyed talking to fellow soldiers. We touched upon our army life, of course, but it was mostly about what we did before or what we intended to do after. Longing and desire gave wings to our imagination. Our plans for the future kept growing and so did accounts of our accomplishments in the past. I suppose even the most truthful among us occasionally told fanciful stories. And the basic fact of our life, that we were young men without women, massively colored not only numerous erotic anecdotes and jokes but all other kinds of conversation.

We discussed politics too but only discreetly – everyone was aware that the army is a particularly dangerous place for heretical views, both because of the strong likelihood that informers would report on you, and because the army had particularly strict criteria for what was permissible criticism and what was not. For example, criticizing even a single dish served in our austere and unheated dining hall was out of bounds. A soldier was permitted to complain merely about the smallest matters and had to use “I”, only speak in his own name. To say “we” was to risk being considered mutinous.

However, occasional remarks and spontaneous emotional reactions of my fellow soldiers indicated that neither the ruling communist party nor our political and economic system were popular among these young men. Yet for many Tito was an overwhelming figure, wrapped in mystery and indispensable. But what were the changes my comrades wanted? They knew quite a bit about Western Europe because of Yugoslavia’s trade contacts and tourism and because many Yugoslavs worked in Western European countries. And they all agreed that Western Europe was better organized, more efficient and, of course, much wealthier. But what political and economic institutions it had and how they worked, hardly anyone knew or was interested in knowing. Indeed, together with their admiration for Western Europe there was also mistrust and a widespread belief that its democracy was a charade behind which the rich ruled. It was a kind of simplified, primitive Marxism. Yet hardly anyone took our official Marxism seriously. These young men failed to see the contradiction between their great hopes and plans for the future and at best modest circumstances in which they had grown up and would continue to live unless major democratic reforms were carried out.

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On the 10th of February 1979, Edvard Kardelj died. He had been the leading Slovene communist since the 1930s and one of the main architects of the Yugoslav post-war political and economic order. Through the late sixties and seventies, many in Yugoslavia and in the West considered him the most likely successor to Tito. Indeed, he might well have climbed onto Tito's throne had Tito not outlived him.

In the realm of ideology, Kardelj was more active than Tito who was primarily a man of power and pomp though, of course, no major ideological changes took place without his approval. It was during the period of Kardelj's ascendancy that the communist parties of the six constituent republics and two autonomous provinces (both in Serbia) gigantically increased their power at the expense of the Yugoslav party bodies. Yet there was no political freedom for non-communists. Further, Kardelj's ideas decisively influenced the 1974 constitution of the [Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia](#), which transformed the country into a radically polycentric federation. From that time on, only Tito's power could cross the borders of the republics. There was also the army as an all-Yugoslav institution but with the important caveat that the republics acquired territorial defense forces, which would play such a destructive role in the wars of 1990s.

Kardelj had also written many a volume on workers' self-management, an economic policy or a way of organizing the economy that supposedly guaranteed direct democracy in enterprises for workers and all other "working people." The Yugoslav régime was very proud of self-management and considered it a distinctive characteristic of Yugoslav socialism. Together with more space given to market forces, workers' self-management was meant to make "our socialist economy" superior to the bureaucratic, centrally planned socialist economies of Eastern Europe. The idea was also popular with many Western intellectuals of the Left but with the demise of communism in Yugoslavia self-management completely disappeared and there were no workers' protests demanding its return.

Kardelj's death remains inscribed in my memory because in my garrison it turned out to be a non-event of monumental proportions – not a tear shed, hardly any interest shown, very few questions asked. Two or three Slovene soldiers were somewhat upset that we who were of other nationalities obviously could not care less for their fellow Slovene – but they themselves showed little emotion. I can still see an officer talking to a group of us about Kardelj as the father of self-management and how our indifference was embarrassing him.

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I sincerely loved Yugoslavia. I embraced the pan-Yugoslav national identity and always declared myself a Yugoslav (rather than a Serb or a Montenegrin) in the census. Indeed, at one point there were over a million people in Yugoslavia – a country of twenty three million – who had done the same. But in the Army – yes, this may be hard to believe – we “Yugoslavs” were somewhat suspect and if one answered the question about one’s nationality with “I am a Yugoslav,” it would be written in his file that he was “nationally undecided.”

There were no nationalistic incidents in my garrison and people from different parts of the country got along well. But if Yugoslav unity functioned well in practice, there was no place for it in theory. Officers devoted considerable time to “political education” sessions that left us bored, though we preferred them to being out on training or duty, exposed to the elements. As one would expect in an ideological one-party state, “political education” was indoctrination. It was all about the wonderful properties of our political and economic system, Tito’s multiple greatness, global significance of our non-aligned foreign policy, and how no country on earth could defeat our Army. But Yugoslavia as a country was hardly ever mentioned, little was said about what our nations had in common, there was no history and no culture. The struggle of communist-led Partisans during the Second World War was often invoked but their famous slogan “brotherhood and unity” only occasionally and emptied of the powerful emotional content it once had. The Army, and the party that led it, obviously had only a half-hearted commitment to Yugoslavia. It was they who were “nationally undecided.”

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Perhaps strangely, I found pleasure only in very good, serious books. It was not easy to find the time and place for reading. The Yugoslav People’s Army would not leave its soldiers in peace even when they were off duty and there were no tasks to perform. Officers invented utterly futile activities. For example, I remember my platoon spending hours picking up fallen branches to clean a wooded slope because an official ceremony was going to take place in the neighboring field.

The only way to read was to have my book with me at all time and use every opportunity. When we went on marches, I discovered that a bag with a gas mask which we carried strapped above the left hip could be something more than a dangling nuisance – it proved a perfect place to carry a book. Since walking had always been one of my favorite forms of exercise, I did not find the marches tiring, and when we stopped to rest or eat, I would pull out my book. In late spring and summer the reading was pure joy – I would be lying on the thick soft grass (now and then

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speckled with wild flowers). Ancient forests and mountain peaks surrounded me. I would soon be lost in the text, happily uninterrupted.

In the barracks, space was scarce and it was all but impossible to be alone. One platoon (around thirty five soldiers) slept in one dormitory on bunk beds. We had only one classroom for the whole company (around one hundred and forty men) in which at most a third could be seated. So we spent much time standing in the corridor, which became a kind of common room. On officer-free days, for example on Sundays, the noise level rose. Some soldiers seemed always to be arguing while others could not keep their voices down even while playing chess. Music blasted from soldiers' audio tape recorders. The men's music preference was new Yugoslav folk, composed in the style of traditional peasant music but highly commercialized and rarely good. It seemed to demand to be played loudly. I would feel my head getting bigger and its content evaporating.

One song, played over and over, particularly tormented me. The whining, slightly hysterical voice of the female vocalist recounted her love for a man and his rejection of her. The silly refrain kept repeating itself inside my head. I had no right to complain to the soldier who was playing the song on his tape recorder, let alone to reproach him. Others were playing music too, his was not especially loud, and he was on the far side of the dormitory. Yet I was seized with a desire to throw his recorder through the window. Occasionally I indulged in a disapproving look at this short, dark, slightly awkward man with little education. I never thought of how he saw me, indeed I believed he hardly noticed me. But of course he did. I was pale, often with a grave expression, and I read books. Most importantly, I was seven or eight years older than him (the majority of conscripts were eighteen or nineteen years old, while only those who attended university, either as undergraduates or graduates, could delay their military service as late as twenty seven).

One day I found myself in his proximity while the wretched song was contaminating the surroundings. He suddenly looked up at me and started talking about how much the song meant to him. His expression and the tone of his voice revealed that in his eyes I had an aura of authority. Here finally, he thought, was someone who could understand him! He became almost tearful as he poured out his confession. If he could only find a woman with such a loving heart he would love her forever. I could see that the song increased his longing for love while also filling him with despair that he might never find it. He enjoyed listening to the song but it also made him suffer. Perhaps the suffering brought him some pleasure too. I was embarrassed but soon found the words of sympathy and understanding that he had expected from me. No, he should not be ashamed of his feelings – they were noble and pure. All was well with him. I also praised the beauty of the song. I was not lying in order not to offend him. For that brief moment, it did seem beautiful to me.

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A few months after my release from the army I went to London and began to write texts critical of the Yugoslav political system. Yugoslav party bosses attacked me in the media and it became obvious that I could not return. I pursued my studies, got a PhD at London University and worked in academia in Germany and the United States. My next visit to my country would come in December 1990, after almost eleven years of political exile, when Yugoslavia was already disintegrating and the civil war beginning. So the Yugoslav People's Army and my comrades-in-arms turned out to be my last experience of Yugoslavia. And it may be that one of the reasons why I remember that dreadful song, indeed that for me it is almost an anthem of my time in gray-olive uniform, is that I also had loved in vain – not a person, but a country, my Yugoslavia.

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