

In March 1997 some 150 persons participated in a three-day conference at the University of Toronto, sponsored by Science for Peace. It was intended to identify "lessons" for the world to learn from the tragic dissolution of the late Yugoslavia. This report will summarize some of the inferences and recommendations arising from that gathering, including its informal discussions.

The conference included people from government, humanitarian organizations, the peace movement, peacekeeping forces, journalism, and academe. Except for one large evening event, admission was by invitation only, for two reasons. First, we wanted the discussions to be well-informed, and in this we succeeded. Many of our "paying guests" were experts who might very well have been invited to speak in a formal way. Second, we wanted to avoid a public uproar, which unfortunately can be anticipated from people who see themselves as representing an aggrieved group in the aftermath of war. It is normal practice when organizing meetings in the former Yugoslavia to invite a quota of participants from each of the country's constituent ethnic groups. We chose not to select anyone on that basis; furthermore, when members of local nationalist groups requested admission, we made it clear that they were invited only as individuals and not as representatives of any community. We explained that the speakers were chosen for their expertise on particular topics, and not for their ideological commitments or ethnic identities. Nationalists of all sides were present but not numerous in the audience. As some of them complained bitterly, they were not represented at all at the podium; all the speakers seemed to be united in regretting the break-up of Yugoslavia.

The speakers did not all agree about the causes of Yugoslavia's crisis. Indeed, they gave significantly differing accounts. All those who had been Yugoslav nationals emphasized domestic factors, whereas some foreigners attributed the country's problems primarily to external geopolitical factors — either the hegemonic maneuvers of great powers, or economic pressures originating in the Bretton Woods institutions. Still other speakers pointed out that it was not necessary to choose among these causes; all of the factors that were listed could hypothetically have played a part.

Of course, a complete list of causes would be infinite. We want to identify only the factors that, if they appeared in the same combination again, might reproduce the same outcome. I shall list factors that were identified either in speeches or during informal conversations at the conference. After each possible causal factor, I shall suggest

certain "lessons" from the Yugoslav experience that seem to deserve further reflection.

Many mistakes have been made in that country, causing untold suffering. The most suitable memorial to the unfortunate victims is to learn from those mistakes and respond better in the future to similar crises as they arise elsewhere.

I THE CAUSES OF YUGOSLAVIA'S CRISIS

After its break with Stalin and until the end of the Cold War, Yugoslavia, as a socialist country, enjoyed an unusual degree of support from the West, which held it up as an example of independent development for other East European countries and appreciated its position as a barrier to Soviet access to the Mediterranean. The country was also politically stable, prosperous, comparatively free, and apparently successful as a multi-ethnic society. It was recognized as influential on the international stage as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement. Why did it come, seemingly so quickly, to its disastrous end in the 1990s? I shall consider the following aspects: (a) constitutional factors, (b) economic factors, (c) international and intranational political processes and influences, (d) international law or lack thereof, (e) the curtailment of a free press and media biases, (f) Yugoslav militarism and the celebration of violence, (g) the rise of nationalism and neo-conservatism, and (h) the weakness of democratic political culture and of civil society.

Constitutional Factors

Professors Mitja Zagar and Robert Schaeffer provided complementary historical overviews of Yugoslavia's post-World War II constitutional problems and political economy. As Zagar explained, the Yugoslav constitution of 1974 defined the republics as "sovereign nation states" so long as they did not violate the federal constitution. Though formally extremely decentralized, in reality there was considerable integration at the federal level because of the dominant role of President Tito and the highly centralized Communist party.

Tendencies toward centralization and decentralization are simultaneously present in every society; these trends always have to be kept in balance. With the death of Tito in 1980 and the dismantling of the single party, the balancing mechanisms were broken. The federal constitution did not provide for new formal structures capable of reconciling political disputes or the ethnic conflicts that came to be associated with them.

Throughout the 1980s, conflict increased between the proponents of a centralized and a decentralized federal system. Much as in the Soviet Union, but contrary to most Western assumptions,