

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

This month we will take a break from Vernonia's history to explore another part of the world with a much longer and more complex history, the former country of Yugoslavia. We'll also depart from the editorial "we" so this writer can tell the story from a personal perspective.

During the academic year of 1968-69, I was privileged to participate in Portland State's Central European Studies Program in which sixteen students under leadership of a PSU professor attended the University of Zagreb in what is now Croatia. I recently returned from a three week visit to this area, my first time in forty-six years. This land, roughly the size of the State of Oregon but with eight times the population, has been inhabited for millennia by various ethnic groups and ruled by an array of political structures for the past 2,000 years. Evidence that prehistoric Neanderthals lived in caves north of Zagreb dates from 35,000 to 100,000 years ago.

The Illyrians were the earliest recorded inhabitants of what is now Croatia. While little is known about them, they are presumed to be the ancestors of today's Albanians. Greeks and Romans sailed along the Dalmatian coast of the Adriatic Sea, an arm of the Mediterranean, and sited walled cities and fortifications along that coast and on the many islands there. By 229 BC, the Romans had established much larger settlements and in the third century AD, the Roman Emperor Diocletian built his retirement palace in what is now the city of Split.

With the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, Slavic tribes moved into the former Roman settlements and established themselves across what later became Yugoslavia. In 925 AD, King Tomislav united the Croat tribes into a single nation. By the 12th century, the Croat kings had died out and inland Croatia was governed by Hungary; the Venetians conquered the coast. The Ottoman Turks conquered inland Yugoslavia as far as Slovenia in the north in the 15th century and ruled for 400 years in what is now Bosnia-Herzegovina and other southern states. The Austrian Habsburgs gained the Croatian inland in the 17th century. Venice fell to Napoleon in the early 19th century, and the Habsburgs took control of the coast as well.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire lasted until World War I after which the Croats, Serbs, Slovenes and Bosnians banded together to become the Kingdom of the South Slavs - Yugoslavia. United by similar ethnicity and language but divided by religion (Catholic, Eastern Orthodox Christian, Muslim and Jewish) and alphabet (Latin and Cyrillic), it was never truly unified until after World War II when the leader of Yugoslavia's own Partisan Army, Josip Broz, nicknamed "Tito" became "President for Life." He held the country together for almost forty years until his death in 1980. As he famously said, "I am the leader of one country which has two alphabets, three languages, four religions, five nationalities, six republics, surrounded by seven neighbors, a country in which live eight ethnic minorities."

I was aware of the tension between various groups during my year in Zagreb, especially between the Serbs and the Croats, due to long-standing resentments intensified by differing alliances during World War II. Serbo-Croatian was classified as a single language using different alphabets; Serbian is written in the Greek-based Cyrillic alphabet but there were a number of regional dialects. Slovenian and Macedonian were separate Slavic languages. Minority groups like the non-Slavic Albanians in the autonomous region of Kosovo weren't well accepted. Tito was able to hold it all together and create a less restrictive Communist regime, delicately balancing the needs of his people with pressures from the Soviet Union and the west. Yugoslavs had more personal freedoms than other countries in the Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc. People were allowed to have small businesses and to travel outside the country. I had a feeling then, borne out by history, that when Tito was gone, the country would splinter.

Although Tito had established a successor government before his death with a rotating presidency from the six republics (Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia), the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused the old rivalries to surface once again. This led to the bloody wars of the first half of that decade that claimed over 250,000 lives. There were several separate conflicts during this terrible decade, and no one side is completely to blame. Slovenia and Croatia were among the first to declare independence from the former

state, and by 2008, the six former republics had become six separate countries. The Serbs and Croats are even artificially separating their language with new words to distinguish one from the other, and similarly Montenegro has begun to refer to its language as Montenegrin. Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia have an alliance with an overarching government comprised of equal representatives from each country, but the resulting bureaucracy and complexity have done little but add to the cost of governance.

Tourism is beginning to return to Bosnia, the ravaged center of the 1990s wars. The Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, still has bullet-riddled apartment and office buildings, but new structures have been erected as well. The 450 year old iconic bridge in Mostar, bombed during the wars, has been rebuilt using the ancient method and materials from the same quarry as the original. Several historic buildings in Mostar remain in their damaged and unoccupied state until funds are available to restore them.

In such small countries with few industries, life has been harder in many ways than under the old regime in a single economic structure. In my travels through these three countries and conversations with younger people there, I became aware of their limited prospects for employment and advancement. Many young people are moving to the larger EU countries or talk of immigrating to Australia. One of my tour guides had degrees in history and geography and would like to be a teacher if there weren't 100 applicants for every opening. One taxi driver had a degree in

marketing and communications but gave up looking for work in that field and is considering going to work for a cruise company just so he could travel. Most of those I met who were born after the 1990s wars shared a common hope that there will be lasting peace in that region but are realistic about the challenges of overcoming centuries of division. Many expressed what is known as "Yugonostalgia," saying that life was better when they were one country.

Slovenia and Croatia have joined the European Union and Bosnia-Herzegovina is a candidate. At this point, only Slovenia is using the Euro as its currency. The Croatian kuna and Bosnian KM (convertible mark) are pegged to the Euro, but the local currency is required for most purchases. To put this into a local perspective, imagine traveling from Portland to Eugene and having to go through a passport check and currency conversion, then going over the mountains to Bend where you once more cross a border and again convert to a new currency and language. Do this three more times in various corners of Oregon, changing alphabets twice, and you'll have a sense of what it's like in the former Yugoslavia.

All conflicts aside, I was so glad to have a chance to visit this vibrant, diverse land once again and see it with its modern face. Rich in natural beauty, its castles, ancient towns and old districts within modern cities are a reminder of the vast span of history that we've missed in the New World. Speaking as a tourist, it's a wonderful, affordable destination to explore.



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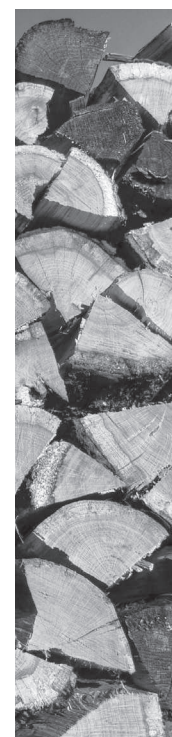
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