

SCARS OF COMMUNISM

First of Four Articles



BY LUCIAN PERKINS—THE WASHINGTON POST

A mother and daughter ride past the skeletal ruins of Vukovar, a city in Croatia where the fall of communism led to brutal civil war.

Yugoslavia Maps a Road to Ruin

Economic Collapse, Nationalist Conflict Could Replay in Russia

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

VUKOVAR, Croatia

They worked in the same factory for nearly 20 years. They both belonged to the Yugoslav Communist Party. In the summer of 1991, as the country they knew as Yugoslavia began to disintegrate, Nikola Radakovic and Viktor Djuriscic took up arms against each other because of a long-submerged distinction: one of them was a Serb, the other a Croat.

Devastated by some of the heaviest street fighting in Europe since World War II, Vukovar has become a symbol of both the ferocity and the senselessness of the war in the former Yugoslavia. A once-charming city on Croatia's Danube River border with Serbia, it also represents the worst-case scenario awaiting the former Soviet Union if the monumental transition

now underway from communism to free markets and democracy is bungled.

This is a place where every trace of multi-ethnic tolerance and liberal European values has been systematically destroyed. Libraries and hospitals have been shelled to smithereens, churches blown up from inside, factories reduced to heaps of metal. Trees stand at odd angles, their branches twisted in crazy contortions. The survivors pick their way through the ruins, still unable to comprehend why the tragedy befell them.

"We have a devastated city and devastated souls," said Slavko Docmanovic, who was mayor of Vukovar prior to the 87-day siege of the city by Serb militia forces and the Yugoslav People's Army. "Before the war, this was a miniature Yugoslavia. We had 23 different nationalities represented here, living harmoniously together. The transition from communism to democracy proved to be a bomb that blew us up."

See COMMUNISM, A40, Col. 1

Perils of Post-Communist Life Doomed Yugoslavia

COMMUNISM, From A1

This is the first in a series of articles about the legacy of communism, the utopian ideology that gave birth to the most far-reaching totalitarian regime the world has ever known. A two-month journey from the center of Europe to the shores of the Pacific Ocean revealed deep scars—ranging from the lack of democratic institutions to the destruction of the natural environment to widespread cynicism and pessimism—that will almost certainly take generations to heal.

The jubilation that many people felt when the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989 has given way to the grim realization that the death of communism did not automatically mean the birth of democracy. Millions of people have benefited from the stunning political and economic changes of the past four years. But millions of others have been killed, raped or driven from their homes in the ethnic wars that have broken out in the Balkans and parts of the former Soviet Union.

"Is there any system that is worse than communism?" goes the latest political joke making the rounds in Eastern Europe. Answer: "Yes, post-communism."

If there is a common thread to conversations in Moscow and Berlin, Belgrade and Warsaw, it is that the much-touted triumph of the West's brand of economic and political freedom is far from inevitable. The most obvious result of the end of communism has not been the "end of history" predicted by one American pundit, but history's violent resumption in the former East Bloc after a long period of dormancy.

History, it is now clear, remains capable of many surprises. "They used to tell us that there were many different roads to socialism. Now it turns out that there are many roads away from socialism," said Adam Michnik, the ideologist behind the Solidarity union movement, which helped start the anti-Communist revolution in Poland.

The road to disaster, which is the subject of today's article, is represented by the former Yugoslavia. Here, the combination of an economic collapse brought on by the failed socialist system and the exploitation of nationalist prejudices by former Communist apparatchiks determined to preserve their political power triggered an explosion of violence and hatred whose effects may spill over outside the Balkans.

With the exception of a handful of ruthless politicians and black market speculators, there have been no winners in the Yugoslav war. Even Serbia, which backed the people who grabbed the most territory, is saddled with an inflation rate of 2 or 3 percent an hour, hundreds of thousands of refugees, seething minorities and international pariah status.

An alternative path is offered by Poland. After three years of painful "shock therapy," which resulted in a steep drop in national production, Polish reformers are now being rewarded with the first fragile signs of economic recovery. Poland has reaped numerous security benefits from the end of the Cold War and now appears as stable as any other country in Eastern Europe.

In the end, it is Russia whose fortunes are likely to prove pivotal for the post-communist era. The original homeland of world socialism bears the heaviest burden of the past and faces the most uncertain future. Three-quarters of a century after the Bolsheviks grabbed power in the name of the proletariat, a new generation of Russians faces the task of rebuilding their devastated country. In many cases, they are so disillusioned by the failed Communist experiment that they no longer believe in the possibility of a better, more normal life.

'The War Made Us Different'

Vukovar, a city of 45,000 inhabitants founded in the 13th century, lies on one of the world's great geopolitical fault lines. For centuries, the Danube River and the flat Slavonian plain formed the military border between East and West, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, Christianity and Islam. Places like Vukovar became melting pots. The last prewar census recorded its population as 44 percent Croat, 37 percent Serb and 7 percent "Yugoslav" (families mainly of mixed Croat-Serb marriages).

Croats, most of whom are Roman Catholic, traditionally have viewed themselves as defenders of Western civilization—in contrast to the Serbs, who belong to the Eastern, Orthodox world. Linguistically, however, the two nations are practically indistinguishable. The long-standing nationalist divisions were ruthlessly suppressed by the Communists who came to power after leading a guerrilla uprising against Nazi occupation in World War II. The Communists remade Yugoslavia as a federation of six nominally self-governing "republics."

"We were born in the same hospitals, went to the same schools, chased the same girls and sang the same songs. We spoke the same language and wore the same kind of clothes. In fact, we were the same, until the war made us different," said Radakovic, who took part in the assault on Vukovar launched by Serb militia forces and the Yugoslav army after Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in the summer of 1991.

In a Croatian refugee camp at Vinkovci, 10 miles down the road from Vukovar, many of Radakovic's former workmates at the Borovo shoe and tire factory dream of the day when they will be able to go home and free their city from Serb "occupation." Before the war, the drive from Vinkovci to Vukovar took 15 minutes. Today, it is necessary to take a circuitous route via Hungary. The journey takes at least eight hours and requires permission from the authorities in the self-styled Serb republic of Krajina, which includes Vukovar.

"I will remain in the Croatian army until I am able to go back home. It could take five years, 10 years, but I am sure I will be back," said Djuriscic, who worked in the building department of the Borovo factory. Like his Serb ex-colleague, Djuriscic insists he took up arms purely in self-defense, when threatened with the imminent danger of annihilation.

To understand how this once-prosperous and harmonious community was destroyed by violence, there are few better prisms than the factory where Radakovic and Djuriscic worked. Employing more than 20,000 workers, the sprawling plant just outside Vukovar dominated the local economy. Many of the toughest fighters on either side came from the factory—and the fiercest fighting took place in its immediate vicinity.

Founded in 1930 by a Czech industrialist, Jan Bata, the Borovo factory attracted workers from all over Yugoslavia. At first, it was a model of progressive management, modern production techniques and ethnic harmony. By the late 1980s, it had become a symbol of everything that was wrong with the socialist economy: a bloated work force, obsolescent technology.

See COMMUNISM, A41, Col. 1

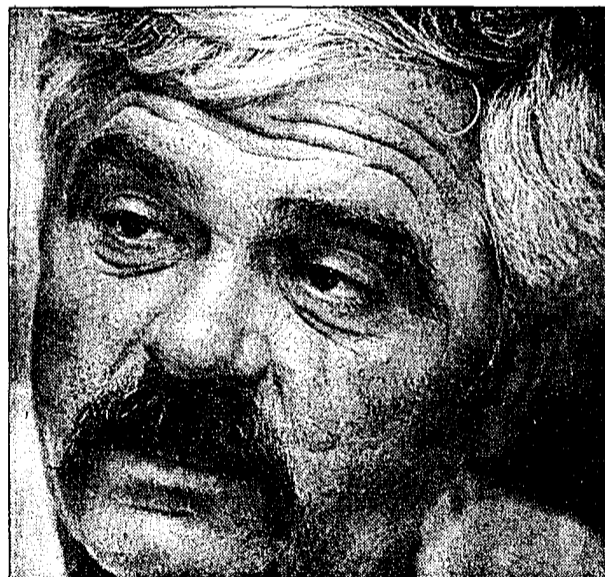


Spoils of war: The Croatian city of Vukovar is a ruin two years after the 87-day siege in which Serb fighters wrested it from Croat forces. A boy looks for undamaged roof tiles, left. At top, a pockmarked sign and building mark both the edge of the city and its destruction. Above, wooden crosses in Vukovar's cemetery stand above the tightly packed graves of war victims.

Photographs by Lucian Perkins — The Washington Post



BY RICHARD FURNO—THE WASHINGTON POST



The democracy bomb: "We have a devastated city and devastated souls," said Slavko Docmanovic, who was mayor of Vukovar before its destruction. "Before the war . . . we had 23 different nationalities represented here, living harmoniously together. The transition from communism to democracy proved to be a bomb that blew us up."

