

Croatian President Franjo Tudjman “was a historian who strayed into politics, whose compatriots have already demonstrated how much he strayed into history as a politician; only several weeks after his death they turned their backs on his party, showing that normal life is much more than just making a thousand-year-old dream of an independent state come true.”

Living in the Past: Franjo Tudjman’s Croatia

DRAGO HEDL

Franjo Tudjman, the first president of an independent Croatian state, died a happy man. On the day of his death on December 10, 1999, the party that he had founded in 1989 maintained its hold on power. Only three weeks later, however, it suffered an unprecedented defeat in parliamentary elections. Tudjman had never considered this a possibility; he used to say that his Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) “would rule Croatia for decades to come.” Those who knew him well said that had he lived, he would not have been able to bear the electoral defeat, and would have refused to recognize the results.

It was this possibility that led the opposition—just before the elections and before Tudjman became bedridden—to demand that the president publicly announce that the results would be accepted. Of course, Tudjman did not comply; he continued to treat the opposition in the same manner as he had throughout his presidency, referring to its leaders as “geese lost in fog,” the “herd with petty interests,” or “foreign hirelings who act against Croatia’s interests for a handful of Judas’s coins.”

Tudjman liked to present himself as a historian, and because he considered history susceptible to change, he believed that as a founder of the Croatian state he had the right to freely interpret it. He enjoyed pointing out that the Croats had realized their dream of once again establishing a sovereign nation because of him and the party he founded. This claim gave him the right to present his people’s history from the victor’s standpoint. Thus, the

Croats have, thanks to Tudjman, become one of the oldest European nations—the Kingdom of the Croats lasted more than a thousand years—whose “historical” role was to stop Islam’s penetration of the West. From this perspective, Croatia was to be considered a “vestibule of Christianity.” This, of course, led to the conclusion that Croatia was on the “boundary of civilizations,” which was the reason that Tudjman, for his entire reign, referred to the Balkans with disgust, stating that Croatia had never belonged to it from the point of its history, culture, or civilization. Yet, after he had modernized and equipped the Croatian army, he referred to his country as a regional power—which it probably is in terms of the Balkans, but definitely is not with respect to Central Europe. His efforts to distinguish Croatia from the “Yugoslav and Balkan inferno” went so far that Croatian historians began to search for new proofs about the origin of the Croats. Earlier theories that the Croats are a tribe of South Slavs were rejected when, suddenly, Iran became the “original homeland of the Croats.”

As he altered the history of his people, Tudjman also did not hesitate to change his own. His official biography has been retouched, corrected, and “trimmed” according to his perception of history. The fact that he belonged to an antifascist movement and was a partisan of Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslav guerrilla leader and communist dictator, did not keep him from becoming one of the most outspoken advocates of the Ustashe, the Croatian Nazi movement during World War II.

In his youth, Tudjman had been a member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which at the time emulated the rigid practices found in the Soviet Union. After World War II he worked at the Bel-

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grade headquarters of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), coordinating personnel recruitment—a position reserved for the most reliable Party members. Toward the end of 1960 he was promoted to general, a rank that only the most faithful Party members also managed to achieve.

During this period he wrote several books glorifying the socialist revolution and the role of Communist Party. Anyone who has read these historical discussions, Tudjman's writings as a dissident, and his works after he came to power would find it difficult to believe they were from the same author. An orthodox Communist became a radical nationalist and switched from the extreme left to the extreme right in an instant.

In the interviews given after he came to power, Tudjman would offer different descriptions of his antifascist period depending on the situation. For external use, he would highlight his antifascist role with a cynical appreciation that postwar Europe was built on strong antifascist sentiment. In Croatia, where his coming to power re-created a neo-Ustashe environment, he would describe his role in the antifascist movement as a “youthful mistake.”

At the first general congress of the HDZ, just before Croatia's first multiparty elections in 1990, Tudjman opened the way for a neo-Ustashe rehabilitation when he asserted that the Independent State of Croatia (a Nazi state proclaimed on April 10, 1941, the day German troops marched into Zagreb) “was not only a quisling creation but also a historical urge of Croatian people for their own state.” Why he made this statement will undoubtedly remain a subject of debate: did he really want to correct his “youthful mistakes,” or was he just repaying his debt to the anticommunist émigrés in Canada and the United States whose money had brought him to power in Croatia? Photographs of Ante Pavelic, the Ustashe head of the Independent State of Croatia who fled from the country toward the end of World War II, began to appear in public places and in many state institutions after the HDZ's electoral victory. Nazi and Ustashe songs and the capital letter U, which had been the symbol of the Ustashe movement, were not only tolerated but often encouraged by Tudjman's administration. It appeared that Tudjman was indeed returning favors to the frustrated émigrés who had been denied entrance to Tito's Yugoslavia for years but still dreamt of the lost Croatian state and its reincarnation.

Despite Tudjman's later claims that it was his HDZ that had defeated communism in Yugoslavia, the reality was somewhat different. After Tito's death in

1980, Yugoslavia became one of the most liberal communist countries with almost all of communism's key features fading away. Yugoslavia's major problem after Tito was not communism but the Serbian nationalism inflamed by Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade. And it was that nationalism that destroyed the Yugoslav federation of which Croatia was a part by arousing Croatian nationalism. More than anything else, Milosevic's disastrous politics helped Tudjman create his own state. But Tudjman did not have a role in destroying communism. In fact, Communist authorities in Croatia scheduled the first multiparty elections and, after losing, handed power to Tudjman and his HDZ peacefully.

When the first free elections were held, only Tudjman realized that power could be taken by adopting radical right positions. He stoked the smoldering Croatian nationalism that had been sparked by Milosevic's Greater Serbia assaults by bringing back Nazi-era symbols and enabling political refugees to return to the country. Although Croatians considered Slobodan Milosevic their greatest enemy after he unleashed Serbian forces on Croatia in 1991, Tudjman did not share that view. His statement, often cited, that he was fortunate that “his wife was neither a Serb nor a Jew” notwithstanding, Tudjman collaborated closely with the Serb leader. The two met 47 times, either as the heads of Yugoslav republics or later as presidents.

PLAYING THE VICTIM

Tudjman's obsession with the “natural and historical borders” of Croatia and Milosevic's thesis that “all Serbs must live in the same state” were incompatible; Yugoslavia was far too small to accommodate two imperialistic political concepts. Tudjman dreamed of a Croatia whose borders once again included a large part of Bosnia, while Milosevic spoke broadly of “Serbian countries” and allowed radical politicians, such as Vojislav Seselj, define these territories. Discussions and relatively frequent meetings held between Milosevic and Tudjman at Tito's hunting resorts in 1990 and 1991 had only one aim: to agree on the partitioning of Yugoslavia, which was already falling apart. They both knew that as representatives of the two most powerful republics in Yugoslavia, everything depended on their cooperation.

Tudjman openly supported the idea of partitioning Bosnia. He said that multiethnic Bosnia could not survive as an independent state, and compared its fate with the disintegrating Yugoslavia. To him,

it was completely logical that the “unnatural shape” of Croatia on the map (which he said reminded him of a crescent roll), would be filled by a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tudjman rejected warnings about the danger of talks with Milosevic on the partitioning of Bosnia. He demanded that his associates publicize the idea of the “humanitarian moving of peoples,” which would allow the newly formed states in the territory of the former Yugoslavia to be ethnically complete. Tudjman was convinced that only an ethnically compact state could survive as sovereign and independent.

The idea of a “humanitarian moving of peoples” was of course unfeasible; at the end of the twentieth century no one would voluntarily leave his or her home just for the sake of being ethnically homogenized. Nevertheless, other means could fulfill this aim. The talks Milosevic and Tudjman held on the partitioning of Bosnia failed to recognize that Serbian and Croatian interests clashed in their concept of ethnically compact states. The national homogenization of Croatian Serbs, who made up 12 percent of the population in Croatia, resulted in the creation of “Serb boroughs” that were gradually linked into “autonomous Serb regions,” which engaged in armed rebellion in 1991 when the Croatian Serbs founded the Republic of Serb Krajina (RSK).

Tudjman did not attempt to dissuade the Croatian Serbs from armed rebellion. He did nothing to soothe their historical fears of the atrocities they had suffered when Croatia was a Nazi puppet state. His inaction paved the way for the most radical Croatian Serbs to gain the support of other Croatian Serbs not wanting to take up arms against Croatia. The proclamation of Croatian independence in June 1991 was a signal to radical Serbs to turn to Milosevic and the JNA for protection.

Croatia was seen as the victim in the fighting that broke out with the rebellious Serbs, who were strongly supported by the JNA and Serbian paramilitary troops. But that role was soon lost when Tudjman started the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the end of 1991—although Croatia had lost one-third of its territory to the Serbians and further advances by the JNA had been stopped by the international community (the war essentially came to an end on January 3, 1992)—Tudjman decided to make up for what had been lost. On December 18,

1991, the day of the fall of Vukovar, a Croatian city whose destruction rivaled that of Stalingrad, he proclaimed the Croatian community of Herceg-Bosna, a statelet in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was to serve as a counterpoint to Milosevic’s RSK in Croatia.

In March 1992 Bosnia declared its independence, and war broke out in the former republic. Tudjman considered this an opportunity to grab part of a country that he himself had recognized diplomatically because it was part of Croatia’s “natural and historical borders.” Claiming he was protecting Croatian interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tudjman created the Croatian Defense Guard (HVO), which was directly supported by the Croatian army. A bloody war with the Bosnian Muslim community commenced, and ended only with the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995.

TUDJMAN’S CULT OF PERSONALITY

At the end of 1995, two decisive military operations consolidated the cult of personality that had begun to grow around Tudjman. “Flash” in May 1995 and “Storm” in August 1995 crushed the Serb rebellion, and liberated the parts of

Croatia that had been taken at the beginning of the war in 1991. The operations were carried out with lightning speed and resulted in the expulsion of almost the entire Serbian population in the Krajina region of Croatia; the number of Serbian refugees is believed to range from 200,000 to 400,000. War crimes were committed during these operations, and Croatia will have to answer to the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

Basking in the popularity of his party, which was credited with engineering the military victory over the Croatian Serbs, Tudjman organized parliamentary elections and strengthened his already autocratic power.

The victory over the Serbs also bolstered the influence of a key Tudjman supporter, Minister of Defense Gojko Susak, a member of the Herceg-Bosna lobby in Croatia. Tudjman was building a powerful army and police, saying it was needed to protect the Croatian state. Backed by Susak, he often noted that the army must carry out “Croatian state policies,” policies that only he could create and oversee.

Always gloomy and dead serious at public appearances, Tudjman helped create a xenophobic

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atmosphere in Croatia by constantly pointing out the dangers of internal and external enemies and the international community's conspiracy to push Croatia into the Balkans because it could not accept the breakup of Yugoslavia. The domestic opposition was deemed a state enemy, something Tudjman noted openly. At several public events and in interviews he stated that 15 percent of the country's people were internal enemies. On one occasion he noted that he had created the Croatian state with the people he had, evidently implying that his state would have been much better if he had been given a better people to govern.

Tudjman's antipathy to the international community's norms resulted not only from a completely deformed comprehension of the state, which he conceived of in medieval terms, but also from a rigid, anachronistic sense of protocol. He surrounded himself with uniformed lackeys, creating the impression they were part of a hallowed state tradition, and bored those with whom he conversed by giving endless history lectures. Tudjman turned Tito's villa in Zagreb, where the head of the Yugoslav state stayed when he visited the Croatian capital, into a luxurious mansion, adding office annexes to an already large complex, which he called the presidential palace. Although he rarely traveled on state visits—he received very few invitations—he bought a modern jet that not even the heads of many larger and richer states possessed. Always boasting that it was because of him that Croatia had been pulled from the “Yugoslav Communist inferno,” he accepted all the comforts of communism—from Tito's villa in Zagreb to a luxurious resort in the Adriatic archipelago of Brioni.

He did not imitate Tito by copying only his opulent lifestyle, however. He proclaimed himself a “Vrhovnik” (commander), inventing a rank that did not exist in the Croatian army in an attempt to mimic Tito's title of “marshal.” Tudjman also personally designed a uniform that was tailored for him and that he wore at military parades, as Tito had before him. In a single day he awarded himself nine high-ranking medals, an event that reminded many people of Tito, who bestowed on himself the Medal of National Hero three times.

Tito's and Tudjman's deaths also shared certain similarities. The people wept for both of them. As at Tito's funeral, a multitude passed by Tudjman's coffin to pay tribute. Yet there was an important difference. At Tito's service the most important political leaders of the time were gathered. For Tudjman,



“Commander” Franjo Tudjman

the only head of state to pay tribute was Turkish President Suleyman Demirel.

MYTHMAKING

Tudjman's official biography reports that he attended the secondary school in Zagreb between 1934 and 1941, where he supported himself tutoring. He graduated from a military college in 1957 and received a doctorate in history at Zagreb University in 1965. Journalists have unearthed somewhat different facts: after World War II he finished the second grade of a school for salesmen, which was validated as a grammar (four-year secondary) school. Afterward he graduated from a two-year military college, which was considered equivalent to a four-year university degree. He did receive a doctorate, but it did not come from Zagreb, as the official biography claims, but from Zadar, where the standards were considerably lower.

Tudjman was so proud of his scientific work that he once noted, during a television program in which he was discussing the books he had written on history, that he would have been awarded a Nobel Prize if only he were not a Croat. His books, however, created only more troubles for his already

isolated homeland. No sooner had the storm blown over about his statement that he was fortunate because his wife was neither a Serb nor a Jew than he published a book (its title poorly translated in English as “Horrors of War”) that openly expressed anti-Semitic views and a strong disapproval of Jewish organizations. In response to the outcry over this content, Tudjman was forced to rewrite some of the book.

Tudjman’s views on history ignited controversy in other areas as well. In an attempt to bring about the national reconciliation of Croats who had waged wars under different flags, he proposed building an ossuary for “all Croatian victims” near Jasenovac, the site of a Nazi concentration camp where the Ustashes slaughtered thousands of Serbs, Jews, and Croats who opposed Nazism. Drawing on the actions of Spanish General Francisco Franco, who carried out such a reconciliation project after the Spanish civil war, Tudjman proposed mixing the bones of the Ustashe executioners with those of their victims at Jasenovac. This morbid idea was condemned both inside Croatia and elsewhere, and Tudjman shelved the project. With his death it will certainly be dropped forever.

Tudjman’s project was wrong at its root: he wanted to reconcile ideologies, not people. He wanted to reconcile Ustashes and partisans, but in reality he did everything possible to drive them further apart. When he took power, he had all the symbols of the antifascist struggle erased—even monuments were physically removed. Streets and squares named after antifascist heroes were renamed. With his approval, for example, the “Square of the Victims of Fascism” in Zagreb became the “Square of Croatian Great Ones.” And he gave his silent consent when streets in many Croatian towns were renamed after Ustashe Minister Mile Budak. He even allowed a grotesque changing of the language similar to the one introduced by Ante Pavelic during Nazi-era Croatia. Introducing a Croatian national currency, which was to have been called Croatian *kruna*, he opted, at the last moment, to call it “*kuna*,” the name for money used in Croatia during the Ustashe regime.

Tudjman’s arrogance was so advanced that he alone decided the names of football teams. Thousands of young football fans supporting “Dynamo,” a Zagreb football team, turned against him after he changed the name of their team to “Croatia”; his battle with them over this move continued until his death. At football games, police often beat young men who chanted “Dynamo” instead of “Croatia.”

Tudjman called these opponents names, saying that they were “Yugo-nostalgics,” and told them that if they wanted to support “Dynamo” they should go to Kiev or Bucharest, or to Pancevo in Serbia, where football teams with that name existed.

He despised the independent media and sued journalists for slander and insult at whim. Even now, after his death, several lawsuits remain filed in Croatian courts. Almost daily, he appeared on television for utterly trivial official ceremonies, and his apparatchiks made sure that people whose articles praised the president held important media positions. The independent media were suppressed; Tudjman could not tolerate any criticism. If independent journalists dared to criticize him by writing about the autocratic nature of his rule, he would dismiss them as children of former JNA officers who had been born into families of mixed marriages. Yet it did not occur to Tudjman that he himself had been a JNA officer and that his grandchildren, too, came from a mixed marriage (his daughter married a Serb when the family had been stationed in Belgrade). He considered human rights a Western fabrication, and the idea of a constitutional state respecting civil rights was arrogantly discarded in favor of sovereignty and national independence.

Tudjman saw Croatia as a statelet that would be ruled by 100 rich families, among which his family would occupy the most important position. His property and assets were estimated to be in the billions of dollars by some Western media, which ranked him as one of the richest rulers in the post-communist transition countries. His wife, who met him during his partisan days and bore him three children, founded a humanitarian fund for Croatian children. Rumors were spread about the fund and the business of Tudjman’s youngest son, Stjepan, who profitably dealt in supplies for the military. His daughter Nevenka often was in the middle of various scandals as well, especially those involving financial connections with the fledgling rich. One of his grandsons, Dejan Kosutic, founded a bank, and the other, Sinisa, enjoys the expensive sport of automobile racing. The eldest son, Miroslav, headed the Croatian secret service, which engaged in the unauthorized tapping of independent journalists, opposition leaders, and intellectuals. While his family made a fortune and grew rich, living in opulence and luxury, the Croatian middle class was dragged into poverty. The Croatian economy has been devastated and its potential stunted; the foreign debt alone amounts to \$9.5 billion.

CROATIA'S NEW BEGINNING

Tudjman began to lose weight rapidly, and in November 1996 he was diagnosed with stomach cancer. He did not allow discussion of his illness. Although CNN reported that he was ill and gave his diagnosis, that information was never confirmed in Croatia, not even after his death. While he was undergoing treatment for cancer during the next three years, Tudjman hid all traces of his illness. For a while he wore a wig to conceal the effects of chemotherapy. Only several weeks before he was admitted to the hospital, at what would be his last press conference for foreign journalists, Tudjman publicly asserted that he was intellectually and physically fit.

After he had fallen into a coma and it became clear that he was succumbing to the cancer, those who surrounded him were suddenly at a loss, realizing that the constitution did not provide a means to name Tudjman's replacement while he was still alive. The constitution offered only three possibilities for a change in leadership: resignation of the president, his death, or his permanent disability. Despite the unfavorable health prognosis, no one dared to pronounce him permanently disabled. Instead, a new law that confirmed his temporary disability had to be enacted. Only several weeks later, Tudjman died.

After the initial shock and fear had passed, it soon became apparent that Tudjman's death was a relief to most Croatians. It was clear that an era had come to an end. No one believed, however, that the system Tudjman had erected would be quickly dismantled. Like all dictators, Tudjman left his party without a successor. The long-suppressed ambitions of the people who had surrounded him

exploded into a struggle to take his place. But presidential and parliamentary elections had already been scheduled, and Tudjman's party, the once powerful HDZ, was caught: the country was isolated, its economy destroyed, and the army of the unemployed was growing larger by the day. Just at that moment, the party's untouchable leader and authority had vanished.

The HDZ suffered a tremendous defeat. It lost the elections in 9 of 10 electoral constituencies and was forced to let the opposition, a coalition of socialists and liberals, take over. Tudjman's party began to fall apart, disappearing like a handful of salt thrown into the sea.

The international community also was relieved; it no longer had to deal with a difficult man in a touchy area of southeastern Europe. The West believes that whoever becomes president will take a different approach toward Bosnia and make constructive cooperation Zagreb's new policy. Democratization will allow Croatia to establish the standards required for closer Euro-Atlantic integration, especially membership in the European Union and the Partnership for Peace (and eventually NATO).

With Tudjman these goals were impossible because his comprehension of the state and politics was different from the practices that prevail in civil democratic states. He was a historian who strayed into politics, whose compatriots have already demonstrated how much he strayed into history as a politician; only several weeks after his death they turned their backs on his party, showing that normal life is much more than just making a thousand-year-old dream of an independent state come true. ■