

## Europe's Third World

*Poverty and ethnic strife in southeastern Europe will give the Russians a headache for years to come.*

by **Robert Kaplan**

The violence of the twentieth century has derived in large measure from the ethnic hatreds of the Balkans. Bucharest, Belgrade, Sofia, and Adrianople: these were once the datelines of choice for ambitious journalists -- the Kabul, Saigon, and Managua of a younger world. Ernest Hemingway filed his most famous dispatch from Adrianople (now Edirne, in Turkish Thrace) in 1922, describing Greek refugees "walking blindly along in the rain," with all their worldly possessions piled on ox carts beside them. Lawrence Durrell, Eric Ambler, and Rebecca West all found the Balkans to be fertile terrain. As late as 1938 the President of Czechoslovakia, Edvard Benes, advised the future *New York Times* columnist C.L. Sulzberger, "Go to the Balkans, Cyrus....That will be the most interesting place."

The curtain rose in 1912, when Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia declared war on the waning Ottoman Empire and stripped it of most of its remaining European possessions. A second war on the Balkan Peninsula was fought in 1913, over boundaries. Bulgaria attacked Serbia and Greece, leading to an invasion and a partial dismemberment of Bulgaria by its former Balkan allies and Turkey. The following year the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria, by a Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, brought on the First World War. The war was won and lost on a grand scale. The Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed, and a sprawling new nation, Yugoslavia, was formed. It was tenuously dominated by Serbs, and the aspirations of Croats and other minorities were harshly suppressed. Romania was enlarged; Hungary and Bulgaria were reduced and envious. Large numbers of ethnic Hungarians found themselves trapped inside Romania. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire left many ethnic Turks subject to the Bulgarians, and the first attempts at forging a new, homogeneous Turkish state in Anatolia resulted in the slaughter of around a million Armenians.

Following the First World War, democracy sank shallow roots in the countries of southeastern Europe, where the peasantry was illiterate and the middle class underdeveloped or, in certain areas, virtually nonexistent. Parliamentary governments rose and fell, undermined by corrupt and meddling monarchs and by ethnic passions that refused to subside. During the 1930s the British and French policy of appeasement placed the Balkans at the mercy of the Nazis and the Russians. It was Hitler's step-by-step subversion of Romanian independence, helped along by the Romanians' fear of the Russians, which was greater than their fear of the Germans, that attracted Sulzberger and other journalists to Bucharest in 1939.

The Russians eventually triumphed, and for four decades after the Second World War, communism virtually stopped the clock in Europe's poorest corner. Economies remained plundered and backward. Hungry peasantries exist today in Romania and Albania, where Stalinism still reigns. National disputes remained unresolved. Stalin, writes Milovan Djilas, a former Vice-President of Yugoslavia and that country's leading dissident, "was far more interested in Balkan hatreds than in Balkan reconciliations."

Today, as the Soviet Union finally relaxes its grip on Eastern Europe, that attitude has come back to haunt Stalin's successors in the Kremlin. "With the erosion of communism, ethnic problems are bursting out all over Eastern Europe," says Rudolph Joo, a leader of the Hungarian opposition. "While borders are coming down throughout Western Europe, here they're going up." For years it was NATO that had to deal with a Balkan dispute within its ranks -- the one between the Greeks and the Turks. Now, as the tiresome bickering of Athens and Ankara grows desultory, similar disputes threaten to fracture the communist world. George Konrad, another Hungarian dissident, suggests that the old fault line dividing East and West is changing in character: it now divides the East and the West not of the Cold War but of Byzantium and Rome -- of Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats, of Orthodox Romanians and Catholic Hungarians.

In 1941, in her travel book about Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Rebecca West stated flatly that "the Turks ruined the Balkans." When Turkish power in the region disintegrated at the beginning of this century, all the other national emotions exploded. Something similar is happening now. And once again refugees are marching in the rain and mud.

"Our child is Magyar [ethnic Hungarian], and he has no future in Romania -- that is the main reason why we fled," a thirty-year-old Magyar ironworker from Transylvania, a region that has been part of Romania since the end of the First World War, explained to me recently. The man insisted on anonymity in order not to endanger family members left behind. He and his wife and baby had crossed the border into Hungary at night on foot, evading Romanian soldiers, after being pressured by the Romanian authorities to christen their son with a Romanian name. All Hungarian-language secondary schools in Transylvania have been closed, he said, and Hungarian villages that have existed for centuries are being demolished, as part of President Nicolae Ceausescu's brutal scheme of rural reorganization. Moreover, the man said, their apartment in Romania had no heating and frequently no running water. Their ration cards permitted them only one kilo of sugar and half a liter of cooking oil a month. The man added, "The only time there was enough food in the shops was the day Ceausescu came to the local factory for a visit. The food arrived four hours before and was gone the next day. It was like a glass of milk that looked full only because it had been painted white on the outside."

This family was among the more than 12,000 refugees who escaped across the Romanian border last year after the Hungarian government, under public pressure initiated by dissidents abandoned its policy of returning such refugees to Romania. Hungary thus became the first Warsaw Pact state to grant an official status to escapees from an allied communist state. There are between 2 million and 2.5 million Magyars in Romania, making them the largest ethnic minority in Europe. (They are equal in number to the Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East.) A Western diplomat I spoke with in Budapest described the treatment of Magyars and others in Romania as "outrageous and horrific," and observed that the villages being destroyed were being replaced by unlivable apartment blocks, many with communal kitchens and outdoor latrines. The as yet relatively low number of Magyar refugees in Hungary can be attributed to the difficulty that Romanian citizens have in obtaining special permits to enter their country's frontier zones. According to Hungarian authorities, most of the escapees so far have come from villages located within a few miles of the border.

It is a commonplace that the Hungarian-Romanian frontier is one of the meanest borders in Europe. In 1983 I waited four hours in the middle of the night before being allowed to cross from Hungary into Romania by train, and had to bribe an official in order not to have my typewriter confiscated. Since then, like many other journalists I have consistently been denied an entry visa by the Romanian authorities. It is this border, not the one between capitalist Austria and communist Hungary, that constitutes the real line of demarcation between West and East in Central Europe.

President Ceausescu has steered Romania into a dead end where Third World poverty combines with Albanian-style isolation. Those who have recently visited Bucharest, the Romanian capital, describe it as a kind of vast outdoor museum on the theme of European life at the end of the Second World War, with empty shops, dark, rubble-strewn streets, and pallid, malnourished faces. Diplomats and other experienced observers have remarked to me that if television cameramen were allowed inside Romania, their pictures would have a dramatic impact, almost like that of the first photos of the Ethiopian famine. "All the correspondent would have to say is ' This is not Africa or Asia but Europe in 1989,' " a Western diplomat told me. "If only we had a little bit more food, it would be like wartime," goes one of many cynical Romanian jokes.

For years Western journalists labeled Ceausescu a "bold maverick" with an "independent foreign policy." That characterization was never accurate. Even the most cursory look at Romanian history reveals that Ceausescu is in many ways typical of the *voivods* ("princely chieftains" ) of Moldavia and Wallachia, who in centuries past preserved Romanian nationhood through a combination of brutal autocracy at home and subtle double-dealing abroad. But Ceausescu has not been entirely successful.

With his theatrical cult of personality, he has come to resemble King Carol II, who ruled Romania from 1930 to 1940. In *The Balkan Trilogy* the novelist Olivia Manning described Carol' s policies toward the Nazis and the Soviets: "He had been too clever. He had played a double game and lost." Similarly, Ceausescu, far from achieving a significant measure of independence for Romania, has made it more dependent on Russian raw materials than most other countries in the Eastern bloc. And although in one sense his Stalinism is an embarrassment to the reformist Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, in another, more important sense Ceausescu' s policies suit Gorbachev perfectly.

Romania, which is the most populous Warsaw Pact satellite after Poland, with a population of some 23 million, is from the Soviet point of view potentially one of the most hostile of them all. The hatred between the Latinized Romanians and the Slavic Russians is great. And Romania' s claim to territory annexed by the Soviets during the Second World War -- especially to Bessarabia, a majority of whose people are ethnic Romanians -- is strongly grounded. Yet Ceausescu manages to keep Romania eerily quiet. Gorbachev, whatever the impression he gives, can only be grateful for that.

As poverty in Romania increases, repression worsens. Since 1987, according to more than a dozen refugees I interviewed separately, the efforts to force Hungarian parents to christen their children with Romanian names have intensified. This is just one aspect of a highly explosive ethnic issue. The Hungarian Rudolph Joo, whose opposition group, the Democratic Forum, has been prodding Karoly Grosz' s Communist regime in Budapest to adopt tougher measures against Ceausescu, said to me with considerable emotion: "If there

are to be pogroms in Romania, this time they will be against the Hungarians rather than the Jews. And what will the Russians do about it? What will Grosz do about it?"

An attempted reconciliation between Hungary and Romania failed in August of 1988, when a summit between Grosz and Ceausescu, which reportedly the Russians had helped arrange, ended with the public humiliation of the Hungarian leader, who was lectured by the increasingly eccentric Ceausescu on "the retrograde aspects of the Hungarian economy."

The ethnic dispute "has taught Hungarians who their real friends and enemies are," Joo said. He asked, "Are you going to tell me that the Romanians are our allies and the Austrians are our enemies?" Zoltan Gal, the Hungarian deputy interior minister, told me that the ethnic issue is one on which the dissidents "can criticize the Party on a continuous basis." Last March, Hungary cosponsored a United Nations resolution to investigate alleged human-rights abuses in Romania. This was the first time such a step was ever taken by one Soviet-bloc country against another.

Ethnic divisions that date back to the breakup of the Hapsburg Empire not only threaten relations between Hungary and Romania but also threaten to tear up another Balkan state, Yugoslavia, from within.

The Yugoslavia that emerged from the First World War was dominated by the Serbian royal house of Karadjordjevic. In 1934 an assassin linked to the Ustashi, a Croatian terrorist group, killed King Alexander, aggravating a climate of communal hate between the Orthodox Serbs and the Catholic Croats which Hitler proved quick to take advantage of. During the Second World War, Ustashi gangs, which had been granted legitimacy by the Nazi puppet state of Croatia, massacred whole villages of Serbs (as well as villages of Jews and gypsies). The Serbs were not particularly enamored of Josip Broz Tito, the half-Croat, half-Slovene resistance leader who ruled Yugoslavia during most of its postwar existence. The miracle of a cohesive Yugoslavia under Tito was due in no small measure to repression. Purges were harsh and frequent. The most famous of the victims was Milovan Djilas, a Montenegrin and therefore a close kinsman of the Serbs, who was expelled from the Communist Party's Central Committee in 1954 and jailed in 1956. With Tito's death, in 1980, a gradual process of liberalization ensued in Yugoslavia. Djilas himself has been partly "rehabilitated" and allowed to travel abroad and speak publicly. At the same time, the very process of liberalization has resulted in a resurgence of the Serbian nationalism that Tito had managed to contain.

A photograph of Slobodan Milosevic, a Serbian nationalist, adorns a wall in many a Serbian household. Milosevic, a plump, baby-faced man in his mid-forties, is the first charismatic figure to emerge in post-Tito Yugoslavia. Like Tito, he is considered by many in Belgrade to be a ruthless strong man. Observers believe that Milosevic is at present attempting to use his position as the leader of the Communist Party in Serbia to take over the national Yugoslav Communist Party, currently headed by a Croat, Stipe Suvar.

Although Milosevic's aims have brought Yugoslavia's 8.6 million Orthodox Serbs into head-on conflict with its 4.6 million Catholic Croats, a situation that could lead to widespread civil disorder, the most immediate consequences of his rise to power involve the 1.7 million Muslim Albanians in the southern province of Kosovo, within Serbia. Serious Serbian-Croatian political enmity goes back, after all, only to the First World War; the conflict between the Serbs and the Albanians has its roots in the Battle of Kosovo Polje, in 1389, when the Serbian hero Lazar lost his kingdom to the Ottoman Turks, a circumstance that would eventually

encourage the settlement of large numbers of Albanians in what had been Orthodox Christian territory. The 600th anniversary of the most tragic day in Serbian history was marked this June.

The first ethnic Albanian riots in Kosovo since Tito's death occurred in 1981, with protesters demanding that Kosovo, an autonomous province within Serbia, be made a full republic. Since then tens of thousands of the province's 200,000 Serbs and Montenegrins have fled to other parts of the country, alleging ill treatment at the hands of the more numerous Albanians.

The birthrate among Albanians in Kosovo is the highest in Yugoslavia, and the Serbs are clearly afraid of being engulfed. Miroslav Markovic, a high-ranking Serbian official in the federal government, said to me in a recent interview, "The Albanians have seven children per family and they demand we give them aid. The Constitution says you have the right to have only as many children as you can feed. This [the high Albanian birthrate] is an Asiatic mentality that the most well-heeled of Western governments couldn't cope with." My interview with Markovic took place in the headquarters, in Belgrade, of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Previous experience with Yugoslav Party officials, in the early 1980s, had led me to expect a sterile discussion, in which real problems would be masked by evasive, bureaucratic answers. The fact that a high-ranking official would make such remarks was an indication of how inflamed ethnic passions have become in just a few short years.

Recent riots among Kosovo's ethnic Albanians were sparked by changes to Serbia's constitution, which represent a major triumph for Milosevic. After months of heated demonstrations by Serbians throughout the republic, Serbia's parliament voted, last spring to bring Kosovo's judiciary and its security and defense forces under Serbian control. It was a move that the Croats and Slovenes opposed, because (among other things) it adds to Serbian strength within the national Communist Party.

In order to stoke Serbian nationalism, Western diplomats say, Milosevic is bringing the Serbian Communist Party and the Serbian Orthodox Church into a kind of alliance. After years of delay, construction is proceeding apace on the new Saint Sava Cathedral, in downtown Belgrade, which will be the largest functioning Orthodox church in the world. The Serbian Communist publication *Intervju* recently devoted an entire issue to Saint Sava, the patron saint of the Serbs, and put a picture of the new cathedral on the cover.

More so even than the Serbs, the Bulgarians shoulder a morose sense of lost national destiny. Since its re-emergence as an independent nation, Bulgaria has failed to realize its historical claim to Macedonia (now a Yugoslav republic), and almost all of its outlying territories were annexed as a result of unlucky alliances in the two world wars.

At points in its early history Bulgaria was among the most powerful and advanced kingdoms in all of Europe. In the ninth century and again in the thirteenth, Bulgaria stretched from present-day Albania in the west to the Black Sea in the east, and from the Carpathian Mountains in the north to the Aegean Sea in the south. Unlike nations whose empires faded gradually into oblivion, Bulgaria was cut down summarily by a series of invasions that culminated in a 500-year-long Ottoman Turkish occupation. "The Turkish slavery is still our biggest national obsession, in relation to which the struggle of the superpowers is a mere passing phenomenon," a Bulgarian official once said to me. One of the most important dates on the Bulgarian

calendar is the holiday, celebrated on February 19, that commemorates the execution, in 1873, of the Bulgarian guerrilla leader Vasil Levski by the Turks.

With respect to the Turks, the Soviet Union has served Bulgaria like a weight-lifting older brother. In its dealings with Bulgaria, the Turkish government must be cautious. The Bulgarian regime of Todor Zhivkov was able to act with virtual impunity when, in 1984, it stepped up a campaign to require the country's 900,000 ethnic Turks -- who make up nearly 10 percent of the Bulgarian population -- to Bulgarize their names. Eyewitness accounts told of people being forced at gunpoint to sign documents. Entire villages were sealed off, and reportedly, scores of executions occurred. Bulgarians claim that Bulgarization has been a voluntary program. When I last visited Bulgaria, in late 1986, Nikolai Todorov, the vice-president of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, told me, "The state has to protect the interests of the nation, and in the Balkans a nation means one particular ethnic group." He went on: "Keeping the peace in the region means every minority has to be completely assimilated into the majority. It's a pity to say, but it's true." Another Bulgarian was more blunt: "If it weren't for the Turkish invasion in the fourteenth century we would be eighty million now. The Turks still have an invoice to pay."

If the Soviets have been pleased with the Bulgarization drive, however, they certainly haven't shown it. In contrast to their reaction when the Bulgarian regime was accused of involvement in the attempt on the Pope's life, presumably on Soviet orders (Tass issued firm statements of support for Bulgaria), Soviet spokesmen have never publicly defended Bulgaria against attacks from the West about disregard for the human rights of ethnic Turks. The Bulgarization program has focused the kind of attention on the Communist bloc that the Kremlin can do without. And yet, faced with a similar demographic time bomb, the Russians may well empathize with Bulgarian fears of a fast-breeding Muslim Turkish minority.

Moscow's most pressing problem of a Balkan kind is not in the Balkans themselves but about a thousand miles to the east, inside the Soviet Union, in Transcaucasia. Situated between the Black and Caspian seas, east of Turkey and north of Iran, this southern outpost of the Soviet empire exhibits many Balkan characteristics: a diverse ethnic mix, a Third World pattern of development, and communal hatred that often pits Christians against Muslims.

Christopher Walker, a London-based expert on the Transcaucasian dispute between the Armenians and the Azeri Turks of Azerbaijan, and the author of *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*, told me recently that "the ethnic feelings of the Armenians are of a Transylvanian intensity." Armenian national awareness in the modern era, Walker said, has been heavily influenced by, as well as patterned after, the various national movements in the Balkans throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, the Transcaucasian problem is derived from a specific Balkan problem: the conflict between indigenous Christians and conquering Turks. In the aftermath of the First World War there were episodes of extreme ethnic violence between Azeri Turks and Armenians in many places in Transcaucasia -- a small-scale version of the holocaust that had taken place across the border, in Turkey, a few years earlier.

In February of 1988 widespread demonstrations and unrest suddenly erupted in the Soviet Republic of Armenia, after years of calm. The crowds demanded the return of the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh from the neighboring Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1921, following the consolidation of the region by the Red

Army in the wake of the Russian Revolution, Nagorno-Karabakh, whose population is 80 percent Armenian, was awarded to the Muslims of Azerbaijan. Armenian demands for the return of Karabakh have enraged the Azeris, occasioning violence that has left, according to some estimates, hundreds of ethnic Armenians dead and has prompted a large exodus of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan.

*Glasnost* has obviously unleashed an ethnic problem that pre-dates Soviet Russia. Gorbachev reacted by sending troops to the region, arresting demonstration leaders, and transferring administrative control of Nagorno-Karabakh to Moscow. Under the colonial-like Azerbaijani dictatorship, Armenian Church worship and the use of the Armenian language in schools were suppressed. Now, under Moscow's more lenient rule, there will likely be a dramatic resurgence of the Armenian language and culture among the Armenians of Karabakh. Few nationalisms are as intense as the Armenian brand; it is fueled by the memory of a great empire in antiquity, a strong devotion to church, and memories of massacres, including the holocaust in this century. In coming years the pressure to unite Karabakh with Armenia and once again transfer power, this time from Moscow directly to the Armenian capital of Yerevan, will be great.

The Azeri Turks will not easily concede, especially if there is a trend toward greater religious nationalism among the Muslims of Russia's southern republics. The danger, as Djilas points out, is that the Party bureaucracy risks being undermined by competing nationalisms -- as is happening now in Yugoslavia.

With each passing year, Mikhail Gorbachev's ability to project power, and thus influence developments, in the Balkans and Transcaucasia appears to lessen. A significant portion of the more than 60,000 Soviet soldiers that have been stationed in Hungary for four decades are being withdrawn, even as political liberalization, which includes the promise of multi-party elections in 1990, gains ground in that country. In Romania and Bulgaria, where there are no Soviet divisions, much of Moscow's leverage has depended on its ability to subsidize local economies through the supply of cheap oil, among other resources -- an ability that has eroded in recent years, as the Soviet Union has been forced to send more and more of that oil elsewhere for hard currency. Even in Yugoslavia, which broke away from the Soviet alliance in 1948, the Kremlin's leverage can only dwindle. And in Armenia and Azerbaijan, whether or not an economic crisis persists, the rediscovery of ethnic awareness is likely to constitute a destabilizing element for years to come.

In his address in 1987 commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Gorbachev boasted that in 1917 "mankind crossed the threshold of real history....we departed from the old world and irreversibly rejected it." As Djilas and others have pointed out, the "old world" is now striking back with a vengeance. The economic underdevelopment engendered by what Djilas calls Moscow's "industrial feudalism" simply aggravated ethnic hatreds and postponed the day of reckoning.

In the 1970s and 1980s the world witnessed the limits of superpower influence in places like Vietnam and Afghanistan. In the 1990s those limits may well become visible in a Third World region within Europe itself. The Balkans could shape the end of the century, just as they did the beginning.