Yugoslavia: Why was there a civil war?

*The civil war in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that took place from 1991-1995 was the only conflict of those proportions in Europe after the Second World War. Many journalists unquestionably described it as a flare of ancient hatred among Croats, Serbs and Muslims. However, that argument should not be taken as a leading explanation of the conflict. The goal of this research is to give more comprehensive theories of what caused the hostilities in Yugoslavia. To do that it compares explanations given by the most careful observers of this war (journalist, diplomats, historians and political science theorists), sorting and presenting them as three different approaches to the conflict. The first argument highlights the negative influence of Serbian history and pride on the existence of Yugoslavia. The second theory explains that the international actors did not always positively contribute to the development of events and adds that the political solutions given by the international diplomats who dealt with the question of Yugoslavia tended to make the situation worse at certain times. Finally, the last theory supports an understanding of the war as the struggle for power among the Yugoslavian leadership. Certainly there are more theories which could have been included in the analysis of the war in Yugoslavia. However, the three theories mentioned above give the most comprehensive answers to the conflict and for that reason this research focuses on them by giving detailed insight in advantages and flaws of these three approaches to. Lastly, the paper singles out one of these theories as the finest explanation of Yugoslavian war-the theory of political elites who led the country.*

These days it looks like ex-Yugoslavian countries have found their own ways, looking forward, leaving the wars behind and trying to restore good relations among themselves. Slovenia has been a member of the European Union for almost a decade, Croatia joined this year. Belgrade and Pristina are negotiating over the rights of people in Kosovo while trying to meet the conditions for the EU membership. Although still very poor, Bosnia is definitely developing, every year new modern buildings, institutions and organizations sprout throughout the country. Life goes on and older generations seem to remember just the better times asking themselves why they needed the war. Younger generations are mostly in hurry to get their lives in order, find a job and place to live, rarely even mentioning what happen before.

However, the news on the war comes back every now and then to remind us of the dark ages of the 1990’s. A few months ago, the largest massive grave was discovered. It is believed that the bodies of about 1000 Bosniaks and Croats are lying in Tomasica.[[1]](#footnote-1) This news makes one rethink the war causalities. The war indeed created a huge number of displaced, killed and missing people. War in Croatia ended up with 200,000 refugees and 350,000 displaced people while the number of killed was approximately 20,000. Bosnia saw more than 70,000 dead people and 2 more million displaced just in the first two years of war.[[2]](#footnote-2) That is such a huge number without even counting those atrocities by the end of the war, like the one in Sarajevo marketplace or Srebrenica in 1995 when 8,000 Muslims were killed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, it is not an ancient hatred or religious conflict that brought these terrible days. The more I read the more I understood that there are many people who, just like me, pass by those two theories without even taking them into consideration. Moreover, the number of those who see deeper causalities to war is substantial. In this paper I am going to present three theories, each of which explains the war in Yugoslavia differently focusing on many factors other than religion and long lasting hatred.

Tim Judah and Veljko Vujacic argued that the history and the collective memory of Serbians as the first problem. They explained that the way in which Serbian people saw themselves as liberators ever since the time of the Ottoman Empire made them use force to keep the country which they so bloodily fought to establish. Serbs are proud of their history and Serbian leaders knew how to use that sentiment to start the war and achieve their interests. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and a professor of political science at Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Susan L. Woodward, argued that political and economic influence from the international stage was what made Yugoslavia vulnerable and the war so abiding. According to them, the fading role of Yugoslavia as a peacekeeper between west and east, not well thought decision of international community to recognize Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and the timing of that decision, as well as its negligence to undertake serious steps to stop the conflict were the factors that helped kindle the war.

The last theory that I am going to present is that of political elites and their hunger to grab power after Tito’s death. V. P. Gagnon, Marcus Tanner and Marko Zivkovic explained this theory, each from his own point of view. While Tanner focused his writing on Croatian elites and Zivkovic on Serbian, Gagnon strongly criticized both of them. The bottom line for all of them is that elites wanted to seize as much power as they could and the war was the perfect tool towards their goal. Political leaders played with their citizens manipulating and sending them to fight not for the interests of the republic but for themselves.

After explaining all three theories, I am going to argue for the third one, the argument that explains the war as the fault of the leadership in the ex-YU republics. It is true that Serbians are proud and it does not take a lot of effort to convince them that they were historically significant force in the Balkans, but that they did not get anything back for their sacrifice. It is also true that international community was not always just while solving the Balkan question and that it did not show much understanding when it came to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, the war would not have happened if the republics did not have leaders who were hungry for power. All of them, especially Milosevic and Tudjman, wanted to grab the position and rule. They knew that they needed to play the ethnicity card. They manipulated historic facts, laws and armies; they controlled media and lied to their voters, in order to get the presidency.

Before the theories are presented, it will be useful if we shortly observe the history of Yugoslavia from the end of the Second World War until the conflict in Slovenia started in 1990. During the war Tito’s policy of unity among the people was the most attractive. Unlike Mihajlovic who used the war as a chance to cleans Bosnians of Islamic religion or leaders of NDH that were loyal to Hitler and conducted policy to “convert a third, expel a third and kill a third”[[4]](#footnote-4) of Orthodox Serbs, Tito admitted all people to fight along Paritzans and with them managed to liberate Yugoslavia in its prewar borders. Internationally, by the end of the war Tito was strongly supported by the United Kingdom and Russia in his efforts to defeat Germans and Italians and set up Yugoslavia as a federation. After the war, Tito took history in his hands and kept the crimes of Ustasha (fascist organization of independent Croatia) and Chetniks (nationalistic Serbian group during the war) silent. He thought that counting victims would boost national question of Yugoslavia and cause a deep conflict.

Although many historical books marked Tito as an ally of Russians, the quarrels between Yugoslavian and Russian leadership started early, which resulted in Stalin despising Tito and accusing him of turning to the West. In 1948, Yugoslavian communists were expelled from the Communists Information Bureau, when Tito and his closest advisors started making a third way, so called “workers self-management” or Yugoslavian communism. This kind of ideology led Yugoslavia to be far more liberal than any Eastern European country, to recognize greater freedoms for its citizens and turn to the Western world for trading and financial help. Finally, it led to a good living standard, tolerance and strong relationships with many countries around the world.

After Tito’s death in 1980, Yugoslavia started experiencing problems. Slovenia and Croatia had six times bigger per capita income than that of Kosovo and the leadership was too weak to persuade those two countries to keep contributing to national economy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Additionally, changing the constitution in 1974, Tito recognized Kosovo as autonomous province and hugely expanded the rights of Albanians. After his death, Albanian nationalists from Kosovo started demanding even greater freedoms. Afraid that Albanians were looking for independence and unable to negotiate with them, Serbian leaders started repressing Kosovo Albanians which caused the uproar of the other republics that constituted Yugoslavia. In Croatia, leaders who led the movement against the Cyrillic alphabet in 1972 were out of the prison after Tito died and some of them came back to the political stage. One of the communists and Partizans who turned nationalist and returned to take up a position after being in prison is Franjo Tudjman, who later was one of the most responsible for the civil war of ‘90s. Those are only a few of the conflicts among the political leadership that Yugoslavian rulers could not manage in a peaceful manner after Tito died. Those led to many more conflicts which ended with republics and their leaders bypassing the constitutional provisions which finally resulted in civil war a decade after the death of Tito.

The history of Yugoslavia in ‘90s is the only period after the Second World War that Europe experienced atrocities like mass rapes, concentration camps and genocide. However, the international community showed very little interest in the conflict before the crimes against humanity were committed. After the war, international organizations and great powers suffered a lot of criticism because of their inaction. Because of the significance that this war represents the next section of this paper will present three different theories that are trying to explain why the war in Yugoslavia happened.

*Serbian history explanation*

After the war, people who studied political science were tempted to see Serbia as the only cause of the war. In media, Serbians were often described as predisposed to go to war. Taking Serbian history it is not hard to see why. At the first glance, it looks like their history was a history of wars. The first signs of stable Serbian state showed after despot Stefan Nemanja assumed the throne in 1166. Until 1380s when Ottoman Empire started attacking Serbia, Serbian history was marked by battles in which Serbia, as any other country at that time, wanted to conquer more territories. The end of the 14th Century marked the beginning of the Ottoman rule in Serbia which was going to last for five centuries. Here, it is very important to emphasize the Kosovo battle that took place in 1389. As many writers correctly notice, this battle has a lot of significance in building Serbian identity even today. History textbooks in Serbia give a lot of significance to this event since it was the one where Serbian knight, Milos Obilic, killed the Turkish sultan Murat I. Even today the battle of Kosovo is used by Serbian leaders as a great mean for the manipulation of Serbian people. With the help of other Balkan nations Serbs reconquered their territories in the First Balkan War (1912). Although united in the first war, Serbia and Bulgaria went to war against each other right after they defeated the Ottomans. Those two countries started fighting over the Macedonian territory in 1913. Next year, although just a trigger for the First World War, the assassination of Archduke of Austro-Hungary, Franz Ferdinand, by Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip, will always stay one of the greatest examples of Serbian pride, stubbornness and warlike behavior in the eyes of the world. After WWI, there was Second World War in which Serbia also fought to defend its interests. Finally, after the peaceful period of Tito’s rule, Serbians are regarded as ones who started the civil war in 90s.

Taking Serbian history like that, it is not surprising that once the civil war broke out the easiest explanation of the situation was that Serbs are people who are used to waging wars. Consequentially, the media was fast to accuse Serbs for continuing the history of killings and massacres. However, it is not Serbian history that one should look at when explaining the way Serbs as people behaved during the civil war. To understand the civil war one should focus on how Serbian leaders manipulated Serbian people emphasizing the instances of Serbian bravery in the past. Leaders also manipulated people by making them recall how they defended Europe from the Ottomans, put great effort to defeat Austrians, Germans and Italians, saved the Yugoslavian minorities from NDH leadership (Independent State of Croatia, Ustasha regime) and received nothing in return for their efforts. Moreover, in the rhetoric of Serbian leadership, Serbs were always sacrificed by other countries in Balkan and the international community and the interests of Serbs were always overlooked.

Scholars like Tim Judah and Veljko Vujacic would agree that when taking into account Serbian history to explain the civil war people should focus on how leadership used the history instead of how war-like behavior became a trait of Serbian people during their historical battles for great Serbia. In his book “The Serbs”, Tim Judah wanted to present those ordinary Serbs who were confused and who, in the time of hyperinflation did not have time to think about the problems of just war. The economy started to shake during 80s and it collapsed in 90s. By the end of July 1993 an annualized rate of inflation was 363 quadrillion percent (363,000,000,000,000,000) while the largest bank note printed was of a value of 50,000,000,000 dinars.[[6]](#footnote-6) The value of money was changing on an hourly basis making people run to the store to buy bread and milk right after they got some money.

While thinking of how they and their children were going to find some food, people were bombarded with leaders’ speeches which always included the picture of Serbian heroism through history, calling people to stand up against the enemy and the enemy was everyone-Croats, Bosnians, Albanians and the international community. It was very easy for leaders to spread the fear of Muslims and Croats. One thing that greatly helped was Serbian collective memory of the NDH and Ottoman regimes.

When we observe the casualties of WWII within the republic one can see that, aside from Serbs in Serbia and Croatian in Croatia, the biggest number of dead was that of Serbs in Bosnia (170,000) and Serbs in Croatia (137,000)[[7]](#footnote-7). Those numbers suggest that half of Serbs who died during WWII died on the territory of the Ustasha regime. Politicians started to talk about the casualties, picturing killings, rapes and tortures that Serbs went through because of the NDH leadership, and started using them through media to promote war. It was not hard to make ordinary Serbs afraid, especially those Serbs who constituted great minorities in Bosnia and Croatia. Moreover, the number of Serbs who died during the war is far greater compared to the other nationalities that were going to unite in Yugoslavia (530,000 Serbs comparing to 192,000 Croats and 103,000 Muslims)[[8]](#footnote-8). This fact helped Serbian leaders prove one more thing-that Serbs gave three to five times more lives than other nations to defend Yugoslavia as their national state. This fact was used by Serbian leaders to argue several points. First, that Serbs sacrificed the most for Yugoslavia and the national liberation. Second, that other countries were more likely to leave Yugoslavia without even trying to make it as strong as it was since they never tried as hard to rebuild it at the first place. Finally, those numbers served great when it comes to proving that Serbs gave the most while not getting anything in return.

When it comes to creating fear of Muslim people, it was repeated many times before and during the war that Bosnians are Ottomans who survived and that they were making a conspiracy to overtake Yugoslavia. When one compares the trail of Draza Mihailovic (leader of Serbian Chetniks during WWII) in 1946 and the one of Radislav Krstic (Chief of Staff of Drina Corps of the Army of Republika Srpska) at the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, one can see that neither in 1940s nor in 1990s were Serbian leaders totally free of the prejudice against Muslim people although decades passed since the Ottomans were expelled from the Balkan Peninsula. Both of those men, Mihailovic and Krstic, led soldiers who killed around 8000 Muslims during a single attack in Bosnia. Draza did that in 1943, Krstic in 1995. During the trials both of them refused to recognize that they were involved in killings but did not deny that they ordered territory to be cleared up.[[9]](#footnote-9) While people of different ethnicity coexisted positively before WWII, as well as before the civil war, it seems that lack of confidence ruled among the leaders of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and those trials show that distrust and the desire for domination were always present in the heads of the leaders. Therefore, before and during the conflict leaders in Serbia, but also Croatia and Bosnia, were often playing with the peoples’ collective memory, using the past massacres to frighten people and lead them to take up arms.

Therefore, although the war was not happening on the territory of Serbia, Serbs lived in fear under Milosevic. Leaders’ speeches aimed at spreading confusion and fear and hyperinflation did not contribute positively on the way that they perceived themselves and “others”(Bosnians and Croats). Adding up to the story of Serbian heroism, they were bombarded with one more fact and that is that Serbs were sacrificed under communism when they were sent to work and live throughout Yugoslavia so that their numerical preponderance is diluted. The intended goal was achieved and Serbs were huge minorities in Bosnia and Croatia while this was not true for any other nation in any other republic of Yugoslavia.

Out of the whole republic’s population Serbs made up 32.2 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina and 11.6 percent of Croatia in 1981. On the other hand, that year there were only 2.3 percent of Muslims and 1.6 percent of Croats in Serbia.[[10]](#footnote-10) If the conflict started only Serbs would have many people in other republics that would not be given an opportunity to vote and decide whether they want to stay in Yugoslavia. Since they were minorities they would have to stay under the potential repression of the new governments.

On the other hand, Albanians were a substantial minority in Serbia that, at that time, had greater opportunity to decide on the matters in Serbian politics than the Serbs did on the problems and solutions in Kosovo. According to the 1974 constitution Kosovo as autonomous province had influence in matters of Serbian politics since the constitutional key was “one republic, one vote”. However, Serbs did not have any right to intervene in Kosovo (or any other republic’s or province’s) politics. This meant that politicians from Serbia could not plead for 42 percent of Serbian people who lived outside Serbia proper (Serbia without autonomous regions).[[11]](#footnote-11) It is not hard to see how Serbian politicians could present this situation as great unfairness that is done to Serbian people in the process of making the national state that was made mostly by Serbian efforts and sacrifices.

All of these arguments, that Serbs do not have equal rights to those of other minorities, that Muslims were about to overtake Yugoslavia and that Serbia suffered the most both economically and politically, were presented in “Memorandum”, a piece written by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. This document caused huge clamor among the Serbian people since the writers go as far as using the term genocide, to remind Serbian people what happened during the NDH regime and to call attention to conflict that was breaking out in Kosovo at the time (1986).

If nothing before that, the “Memorandum” made people draw a line between “we” and “them”, we being victimized Serbs and them being Croatians, Slovenians, Bosnians and Albanians by stating that:

“…the vindictive policy towards this republic [Serbia] has not lost any of its edge with the passing of time. On the contrary, encouraged by its own success, it has grown ever stronger, to the point of genocide. The discrimination against citizens of Serbia who, because of the representation of the republics on the principle of parity, have fewer federal posts open to them than others and fewer of their own delegates in the Federal Assembly is politically untenable, and the vote of citizens from Serbia carries less weight than the vote of citizens from any of the other republics or any of the provinces”[[12]](#footnote-12)

This short paragraph contains three main points of Serbian leaderships’ manipulations. First,that the vindictive policy against Serbs lasted for a long time. Second, that Serbs are politically the only nation disadvantaged and third, that the politics of other republics towards Serbia took on the characteristics of genocide.

Describing the reasons for “Serbian exceptionalism” Veljko Vujacic argues that the abuse of Serbian common memory led to the civil war in Yugoslavia since Serbs were convinced by their leaders that they have to defend their national state. He writes that the problem of treating minorities and the talk about Serbian heroism cumulated into many speeches, news, articles, books and many other works by Serbian elite which subsequently had great influence on behavior of ordinary Serbian people during the war. Next to Memorandum, numerous works were published by prominent Serbian academics and politicians in which they glorify Serbian people and discuss how Serbs were sacrificed to the great extent instead of being rewarded for their bravery. Next to Memorandum, one of the most famous works was written by Vuk Draskovic, who organized democratic but nationalistic opposition to Milosevic. The book is named “Noz” (the Knife). Draskovic writes about the Serbian victims of NDH regime. Since talk about that topic was silenced during Tito regime and uncovered at the time of conflict and inflation, these facts stirred up negative, nationalistic emotions among Serbian people that served as a trigger for Serbian fighters. Some other well-known nationalistic pieces from that time are “Vreme Smrti” (Time of Death) and “Gresnik” (The Sinner) by Dobrica Cosic, Serbian writer who was to become president of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992.

After all the evidence presented one cannot disagree that the argument of Serbian history and the way it was used for manipulation is a strong one. Indeed, “leaders drew on the malign threads of their people’s history to bind them and pull them into the war… [and] if Serbian history had been different, today’s generations could not have been manipulated in the same way”[[13]](#footnote-13). However, it is not just the domestic politics that influenced the war. The next section of this research will focus on how the international stage made the situation worse at certain times.

*International disinterest and misunderstanding explanation*

Although the international community was not the initial cause of the war in Yugoslavia, the decisions made in Brussels and Washington and the events on the international stage were often those which influenced the Yugoslavian leadership to act in an aggressive manner. First off all, Russia started to fall apart which made Yugoslavia lose its strongest role that it had during the Cold War-being the bridge between East and West. While Yugoslavia was experiencing economic hardship during the ‘80s IMF and foreign creditors were pushing for liberalization which gave great advantage to those republics, Croatian and Slovenia, which were already much wealthier than the rest of the Yugoslavia. Secondly, when the conflict was about to start, great powers did not show much interests to stop it. Rather they tended to see the conflict as the matter of domestic politics long into the war. Like Secretary Madeleine Albright confessed, the war in Yugoslavia would not have taken on such deadly shapes if the international community was faster in deciding on use of threat of force to intimidate Yugoslavian leadership. Lastly, once the international community was involved in the conflict, the peace plans they made reflected misunderstanding of the situation on the ground and miscalculation of Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian leaders’ actions.

In order to understand how the international community made the situation in Yugoslavia suitable for war the next few paragraphs are going to unpack the argument made above. First, one has to look at the economic and political situation of Yugoslavia and its republics. Under communism “the principle of sovereignty…was simultaneously political and economic, incorporating a long tradition of local self-government in Balkans, the principle of national self-determination…and democratic and socialist ideas of popular sovereignty.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This means that republics had political and economic freedom since each republic had the autonomy over its budget and administration. Within the republic, workers had the right to unite and send their representatives to the legislation assemblies. This constitutional key, together with the principle of “one republic, one vote”, was the bases of equality and it ensured the stability of a multinational state in which everyone contributed to the wellbeing of Yugoslavia. Thanks to those constitutional keys, decentralization that came to be greater as the time passed, thanks to expanded trading rights for the people and companies who wanted to work with foreign partners but also because of the foreign loans, Yugoslavia became economically prosperous and the life-standard was comparable to the standard of western countries at that time.

However, Tito’s death coincided with an oil crisis when the IMF tightened its lending policies, interest rates on US dollars raised sharply and the economic depression started. As I mentioned, Yugoslavia was slowly reforming the country while Tito was alive, it was more decentralized and liberalized compared to the East. However, although the will to follow the Western form of economy became even more influential after the ’80s, IMF and other foreign creditors pushed their requirement for further liberalization stronger than they should have. Yugoslavian leadership managed to meet those requirements but the problem was that once implemented those policies gave much more advantage to Slovenia and Croatia which were already the wealthiest republics. The first indicator of much better economic situation in western republic was unemployment. Slovenia, for example, had full employment in 1984 while unemployment in Macedonia was 27 percent.[[15]](#footnote-15) Moreover, despite the southern republics needing more financial help, majority of foreign investments went to Slovenia and Croatia since those two republics were culturally, politically, geographically and historically better integrated into Western Europe.

All of this influenced the beginning of civil war in the way that changes on the international stage made the governments of each republic look for its own interests, dividing the country in two blocs. As noted above, Slovenia was much wealthier than the rest of Yugoslavia. Foreign investors were calling Slovenia to see that they would be better off if they left Yugoslavia and completely opened their markets to the West. This happened during the ‘80s and the indicator of Slovenian contribution to the economy of the Federation fell sharply. Moreover, Slovenian leadership started forbidding Bosnian and Albanian people to work in Slovenia. One reason for that was political, Slovenians started to feel that with more immigrants they were going to lose their cultural identity.[[16]](#footnote-16) The other reason was economic; immigrants would increase the demand for social help. One can see how this discriminatory policy pulled Yugoslavia in the direction which other republics did not perceive as fair. Serbs were pulling in other direction which was eventually going to lead to war. While Slovenes were fighting to establish the disintegrative federalism, Serbian leaders wanted the reform on the federal level, especially because it was the only republic with autonomous provinces which could use their vote to require economic help from Serbia whose economic hardship was becoming worse and worse over the course of the ‘80s. Therefore, in the context of economic conflict the international community has to accept that its policies of accelerated liberalization and the financial requirements that it imposed on Yugoslavia contributed to the formation of the two blocs in Yugoslavia that initially started quarrelling over the economic issues.

The other way in which the international community contributed to the conflict was its inaction. In her book, *Madam Secretary,* Madeleine Albright, describes her memory and the reluctance of the US leadership to send armed forces to Yugoslavia. Although the Clinton administration took office in 1993 they inherited the conflict in Yugoslavia which had lasted for almost 3 years at that point. Still, some of the most prominent politicians, like Defense Secretary Les Aspin and National Security Advisor Tony Lake were not yet willing to use the threat of force. Secretary Albright was always an advocate of threatening air strikes. She knew Yugoslavia pretty well since her father served in Yugoslavia twice. As she describes, without the threat of strikes, every attempt to send the US peacekeepers to enforce case-fires was “like sending David against Goliath only without slingshot or any sign of the divine help.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Moreover, during the war the US and Europe often had different timing, meaning that when one side wanted to intervene the other one did not. For example, the US proposed the policy of “lift and strike” in which embargo on arms to Sarajevo would be lifted while the great power would have been threatening air strikes.[[18]](#footnote-18) At that time (1993) the US allies in Europe had its peacekeepers in Bosnia and were afraid that lifting embargo would endanger the lives of their soldiers.

Secretary Albright still thought that the only way to prevent the war was air strikes or at least the threat of it and she was right. One of the biggest factors that ended the war was the Operation Deliberate Force which started on August 30 and was aimed against the Bosnian Serbs. It seems obvious that the air strikes made the leaders of Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia to finally sit and negotiate in November 1995 in Dayton, Ohio. However, it was so costly that none of the great powers were interested enough to take the lead in Yugoslavia before a serious genocide was committed. If Europe and the US had common interests in preventing the conflict, instead of waiting for the right time and their interests in the region to overlap, they would have understood much earlier that only threat of air strikes would prevent the killings in Yugoslavia.

Finally, the last argument that this research will present explaining the war as a consequence of the international community (in)actions is that great powers were not well informed about the situation in the country. Once they got involved, the lack of information and the inability to see how every republic has to be solved separately instead of pushing for immediate solution for whole Yugoslavia made the great powers undertake wrong steps in the beginning as well as during the war by formulating cease-fires that could not put an end to the war.

For example, it was one thing to recognize Slovenia but totally another thing to recognize Croatia and Bosnia. All three republics were recognized as independent largely due to efforts of Germany. Deciding on their side in recognizing the states, the US and some other European countries foresaw the armed conflict that might happen if the republics of Yugoslavia were recognized as independent states and they emphasized the concern for lives of the people in case conflict broke out. On the other hand, Germany which had unified in 1990 put the weight on the peoples’ right on self-determination. Arguing that if Serbs saw that Croatia and Slovenia are backed up by the international community they would not dare to attack them, Germany managed to persuade its European colleagues that they should recognize those two countries as independent. Next year (1992), the US changed its position and wrongly used the same argument in order to recognize Bosnia and Herzegovina.[[19]](#footnote-19) What Germany and later the US failed to understand is that Croatia (or BiH) and Slovenia were totally different cases and that the conflicts were going to arise in one of those republics.

Out of the whole population that made up Slovenia in ‘80s 2.2 percent of them were Serbs and 90.5 percent were Slovenians. Croatia, on the other hand had 11.6 percent of Serbs and only 75 of Croats. Bosnia was even more multiethnic. There were 32.2 percent of Serbs, 39.5 percent of Muslims and 18.4 percent of Croats[[20]](#footnote-20). Moreover, in Croatia and Bosnia, Serbs had whole regions that they inhabited and organized politically. Republika Srpska Krajna in Croatia had a great majority Serbian population as well as Republika Srpska in Bosnia. Having these numbers and facts in mind, it is not hard to see what international community did not really realize. It was easy for Serbian leadership to give up on Slovenia. Moreover, there was not big and strong Serbian political unity in Slovenia. That is why the war in that republic lasted for ten days and finished without a great number of victims. On the other hand, Serbs organized in Bosnia and Croatia. At the same time, those Serbs had substantial support from Belgrade. Finally, living in such a great numbers in Croatia and Bosnia, ordinary Serbs had many reasons to fear from being repressed by the new regimes in independent countries since as the conflict became bigger and the discriminations and maltreatment of Serbs in those two republics, especially in Croatia assumed greater and greater proportions. Therefore, the ten days Slovenian war led the international community to think that the dissolution of Yugoslavia was not going to be hard at the end. This was false hope since they did not see how different Slovenia and Croatia were.

Additionally, it took long time for the international community to realize where lay the problem. For very long into the conflict the cease-fires that were made were based on ethnicity. For example, in the Lisbon agreement Bosnia is separated on cantons based on the ethnicity where every canton would have the right for territorial governance. Since a lot of cantons were multiethnic just as the whole Bosnia is, as long as the solution followed ethnonational lines the agreements were never going to work. On contrary, they just intensified the disputes among three leaders where the borders of the cantons were on the basis of ethnicity that is predominant in that particular region. Finally, no matter how much effort the international community put in building the cease-fires they rarely reflected understanding of the complexity in the region which just prolonged the time that warring sides had available to commit crimes.

This section of the explanations for the civil war, which presents three arguments of how the international community made the situation in Balkan worse, is coming to an end. Subsequently, this research is going to shift the focus on the third explanation of the outset of the civil war in Yugoslavia. The last of the explanations is the arguments which concerned the elites’ behavior which has certain advantages over the two arguments that this has research presented.

*Political elites’ explanation*

The last theory for the explanation of the civil war is Yugoslavia is that the political elites wanted war in order to grab more power. In their attempt to take and rule over as much of Yugoslavian territory as they wanted, they imposed the war on people who before the beginning of the war lived normally and had positive neighborly relationships.

This argument is well developed in V.P. Gagnon’s book *The Myth of Ethnic War,* Marcus Tanner’s book *Croatia* and Marko Zivkovic’s book *Serbian Dreambook*. Zivkovic described Serbian people as ones who were culturally struggling all the time. They were neither Ottomans nor Habsburgs. Moreover, there was always a deep division among Serbs between those who live in mountains and those who inhabited Vojvodina. The first ones often described as fighters, the other ones as peaceful and calm people. Above all, Serbs were not well educated, even their representatives rarely showed high cultural and educational level. Political leaders knew how to use the situation and were very successful in manipulating the Serbian masses. On the other hand, Tanner explained that Croatian leaders never really wanted to be the part of Yugoslavia but that they chose that path after the WWI since the other two choices left for them were that they stay under the mercy of Austrian kings or their territory to be split between Serbia and Italy. Historically, Croatian leaders have always dreamed and emphasized the importance of independent Croatia since for much of their history Croatia was under the rule of a foreign country. However, Croatian leaders never caught the chance to actually fight and win independence until nationalistic leader Franjo Tudjman sensed that Yugoslavia was falling apart and Croatia became strong enough to confront Serbia. Finally, Gagnon observed both countries, especially their leaders, Milosevic and Tudjman, and wrote in detail how the behaviors of those two leaders influenced the beginning of the war. Claiming that this theory explains best the cause of the civil war, this research will first describe the reasoning behind the theory and after that, I will concentrate on explaining why I as a person who was born at the beginning of the war and someone who has memories of the Milosevic regime, think that this theory does the best job explaining how the war in Yugoslavia started.

At the beginning of the WWI, three educated Croatian personas, Supilo, Trumbic and Mestrovic, realized that this war was going to be the chance for Croatia to get rid of Habsburg rule. In order to do that, they were going to have to unite with Serbia because they were not likely to be recognized internationally otherwise. Therefore, they formed the ‘Yugoslav Committee’ in Italy in November 1914.[[21]](#footnote-21) After the war they became a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. They managed to break away from Austrian rule but still did not achieve what they had wanted for centuries-independence. It was only in 1990s that nationalistic leader Franjo Tudjman managed to make Croats fear of their neighbors and take up arms against them. That is how Croatia finally became independent but at a very high price.

Right after Tudjman came to power he changed the constitution. Under the new constitution Croatia was the country of Croatian people alone and Serbs were listed as minorities while under the constitution of Yugoslavia from 1974 Croatia was also a country of Serbian people. Moreover, the new Croatian constitution marked only Latin as official script, while the constitution from 1974 included both Cyrillic and Latin.[[22]](#footnote-22) For Serbs this was a sign of a serious change. Not only because they were not equal to Croatians anymore but also because conflict was becoming more and more present at the end of 1990. Moreover, after the new constitution was proclaimed Serbs in Croatia started to feel the consequences on their back since Tudjman refused to consider demands of Serbian people for expanded cultural rights. This made them turn to their nationalist leader in Krajna, Milan Babic instead of supporting moderate Jovan Raskovic.[[23]](#footnote-23) Furthermore, as soon as Serbs united to proclaim independence for their part of Croatia, Republika Srpska Krajna, Tudjman sent two helicopters in Knin to seize the police station in order to provoke Serbs to start attacking.

In addition to enacting the new constitution and appropriating many powers for the president, Tudjman also took over the media and used it to manipulate Croatian thoughts and behavior. Marcus Tanner noted that during the Tudjman era, the media in Croatia was even more controlled than in time of communism. Taking all this together, manipulations through constitution, media and power were just enough for Tudjman to convince Croatians that his nationalistic politics were the best way for Croatia to get to its long wanted independence.

In Serbia the situation was just the same, but with different actors. What helped Milosevic a lot is that, in Serbia, most of people are culturally confused. Their south part was for a long time under Ottomans, and the north part was under Habsburgs. Moreover, Serbia always had a lot of minorities like Magyars, Romanians, Albanians, Germans and Roma who brought their cultures to Serbia. In that manner, there are a lot of meals, words, costumes that became part of ordinary Serbian culture and people rarely questioned if those are “true Serbian things”. It is therefore hard to describe Serbians. Zivkovic retells an interesting story on this topic that a bank clerk from Belgrade once told him. He said that most Serbs are not like Westerners who live to work and that is why they saved much and have much, which is why they are “superior”. On the other hand they are not completely Gypsies either, who work just as much so they have to survive. Serbs are somewhere in between, a lot of them work just so they have money for coffee and cigarettes, the other part works like crazy while a majority is somewhere in the middle. The problem here arrives when those who want to be successful leave Serbia, leaving the less educated, culturally lost and easily persuaded to be led by politicians who care just about their positions. This is easy to prove since the Serbian parliament in ‘90s, when there were so many problems to be solved, in most cases looked like a circus. At one of the sessions in 1994 when the topic of controlled media should have been discussed, Pavle Akcentijevic, a member of opposition brought a tape recorder to the rostrum. First he played Iranian popular song and then a new song from Serbian popular singer, Dragana Mirkovic. The melodies were identical. This should have symbolized how little culture and education the government was presenting to its own people. Instead of thinking about new generations and how the government should make them want to stay in Serbia and develop the country, the government controlled media for their own political purposes, playing them the worst Serbian folk music in order to entertain the mass and take their focus from real state’s problems to shallow and cheap enjoyment. Unfortunately, many people, especially those from Milosevic’s Socialist Party did not get this message seriously. They started dancing, sending people a message that Socialist Party is just like people, celebrating with that kind of music like “the people, the Serbs” and that others, the opposition made of intellectuals, wanted to change Serbia because they were ashamed of their people and their oriental culture.[[24]](#footnote-24) The division they made between “us”(the people and Socialist Party) and “them”(pretentious intellectuals, opposition) helped the Socialist Party prove that they work in interest of people, even if they go to war and that, therefore, people should follow them.

Another big example of Milosevic’s manipulation is that he labeled people with whom he cooperated as heroes one time and as traitors when he did not need them anymore. The first and the biggest known target was Radovan Karadzic, leader of Bosnian Serbs. During the war Milosevic sent the army to help Karadzic in his fight to conquer and rule over Republika Srpska (Serbian part of BiH). However, when Karadzic refused to sign the Contact Group plan (peace plan, 1994) over night Karadzic arrived in the media as a gambler and war profiteer. A similar story was with Vojislav Seselj, leader of Serbia radical party. As long as Milosevic needed him as an ally everything was going good but with the first quarrel Milosevic stripped Seselj of his position and of course, used media to present him as dangerous for national interests.

Both of those leaders, Milosevic and Tudjman, used the war situation not to mobilize but rather to demobilize people who were increasingly talking against the regime in both republics. One of the strongest proofs that they imposed the war on people and that the war situation was helping them to stay in power is the fact that Milosevic and Tudjman sometimes worked towards the same goal, and in some situations they worked together. For example, they both wanted to get rid of Ante Markovic, the pro-Yugoslavian prime minister whose liberal reforms were highly popular in Croatia as well as in Serbia. However, Tudjman on one side and Milosevic on the other did a great job telling people that he wanted to make a Western colony out of Yugoslavia. Markovic was forced to resign in the end of 1991 since he had no way of defending his stands under the situation in which TV, newspapers and other informative tools were controlled.

After they made Markovic resign, Tudjman and Milosevic started imposing the war from the top mostly by spreading fear among the people through different pictures on television. There were huge anti-regime protests in Serbia in March 1991, however instead of resigning Milosevic tricked the people until they stopped the protest by promising to meet their requirements. Certainly, he did not meet them. On the contrary, Milosevic decided to boost his importance by making the war even more visible and making people remember past times, sending them a message that those are going to repeat if Serbs do not unite. In April, media showed the opening of caves in Bosnia and Herzegovina in which there were thousands of bones of those Serbs who were killed by Ustashe during the WWII[[25]](#footnote-25). Collective memory was the card on which Milosevic played to demobilize people from protesting against the economic situation and make them take up the arms and go to war. Tudjman had a similar strategy which worked even stronger in Croatia than in Serbia because Serbs and Croats there were more mixed and lived in the geographical proximity. Using media as his most powerful tool Tudjman was making “an attempt to undermine the social realities in ethnically heterogeneous parts of the republic by equating local Serbs, who were not seen in negative terms, to Milosevic, who was.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Imposing fear and hatred on a normally positively coexisting community was not the only strategy of emphasizing the problem of war in order to demobilize people. To boost the war fever, Tudjman as well as Milosevic worked closely with hardline conservatives who were openly talking in favor of war, while trying to eliminate those who worked to maintain peace. Milosevic was openly replacing Serbian moderates who were willing to negotiate. One such example was already mentioned. Jovan Raskovic was a SDS (nationalistic party in Republika Srpska Krajna) leader who preferred peaceful negotiation with Croatia. He was even offered a position of a parliamentary vice president in Croatia.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, orders from Belgrade foiled Raskovic and he was replaced by Milan Babic, nationalist loyal to Milosevic. Tudjman, on the other hand, kept the hardliners in back rows in the public because he knew that people would not support HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union, Tudjman’s party) if it had radical policies. However, those conservatives influenced the policies to the big extent behind the close doors. To grab power through continuous war, Tudjman did not just send the army to the front but he also ordered the murders of politicians who advocated peace. Here, the most known example is that of Reihl-Kir, a politician who traveled through Slavonia (part of Croatia) to promote peace among the peasants. He was killed when one of the members of HDZ fired twenty-eight bullets at the car in which Reihl-Kir was traveling.[[28]](#footnote-28) Those two examples are not the only ones but are the most known. Further observing the political situation among the elites in both republics would give more examples of how Tudjman and Milosevic used every single tool they had to start this war and keep it going since it served them as a source of power.

To conclude this theory I would argue that it is definitely more significant in explaining the war than the first two theories that were presented. Serbian militarism is a good explanation but it is based on the collective memory and how it is used by leaders to wake up negative emotions towards the “others” and pushed them to war. It does not really explain the political flows around 90s that specifically made the war possible. Moreover, it does not fully explain why leaders wanted to manipulate people in the first place. The theory of international community is a great one but as obvious as it is, the international flows did not make leaders go to war. Existing relations in the world did make the war possible and pushed the leaders to act aggressively, however, they did not prevent Milosevic, Tudjman and Izetbegovic from sitting and negotiating. That is why the theory of political elites is the best one, if the leaders of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia wanted to sit down and solve the problems the war would not have happened. Unfortunately, instead of thinking about the wellbeing of Yugoslavia, their republics and their people, Tudjman, Izetbegovic and Milosevic thought how to keep their positions and expand their powers and the war was the easiest way they found to reach their goals.

*Personal story*

I do not remember the war itself since there was no war on Serbian proper and since I was born at the time the war started. However, I do remember inflation, Milosevic’s rule and 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia. Although I was just a child at the time of the Buldozer revolution that brought Milosevic down, my parents started to talk with me about the war and the situation in the country. My father is from Bosnia, my mother is from Serbia. Therefore, I think that their mixed marriage was one of the biggest reasons why they started to teach me not to hate ‘others’ based on nationality. They managed to instill in me that the civil war was not an ethnic one. Additionally, they wanted me to see Croats, Slovenes, and Bosnians just as they were thought to see them, as family, cousins, friends, etc. As I grew up the conversations with my father became deeper. He served the Yugoslav National Army until the war, was born near Sarajevo and finished university in Zagreb and I was a child who showed greater interests in the Yugoslavian political situation as the time went by. Through those conversations I learned to see the situation in the way that Gagnon, Zivkovic and Tanner describe it-as a bloody way the leaders of three countries used to come to power and rule.

I was happy to have parents who criticized the leadership in Serbia and who did not succumb to political manipulations and nationalism. However, it was not only the conversations I had with them that thought me how to think. My experience with sanctions and inflation is priceless. When I started understanding politics I also started questioning everything that happened. At first I had bad words for Milosevic because he was unable to manage the inflation as well as because he made me believe that waiting for bread and oil was a normal everyday life which happens everywhere in the world. As time went by and I knew more, I started despising him because he made my grandmother stand for hours in the line to get basic foodstuff while my parents were working very hard but got so little for their efforts. All those negative emotions culminated when I learned about the difficulties my father, as well as my whole family had during and after the war simply because my father was a Bosnian Muslim.

All of this is enough to convince me that Milosevic wanted the war. No good leader would lead his men to die while children and woman are starving and the country is sinking in corruption and criminal. I will always remember the revolution and be thankful to my mom who took me to the protests in 2000. More than any book, that experience showed me the strength of the united people fighting against the system which is making their lives miserable. Although I did not know what was happening I remember the shouting originating in the energetic crowd “He’s done!” and “Save Serbia and kill yourself, Slobodan!” That was the only protest which I remember. Preparing for this research I was stunned how many times people united against Milosevic before 2000 and that he did not want to recognize his capitulation at any of those protests, which shows how stubborn he was in his intention to stay in power.

Even if no one tried to instill in me the non-ethnic understanding of the war and I did not have “unusual childhood”, my everyday experiences would teach me that the war was more political than ethnic. Not only that my parent’s marriage is mixed one but a lot of my friends also come from those kinds of families. Furthermore, I visit my family in Bosnia every year and go to Croatia from time to time on the seaside and to visit close family friends. Last year, for the first time in my life I went to Ljubljana. No one ever looked at me with hatred; no one ever said one bad thing to my family. Moreover, wherever we went there was always a big group of people eating, drinking, making jokes and recalling the past times. Everytime I was looking at them condemning political leadership who managed to persuade people that the politics of war was the best solution. Looking at them I condemned those who sent men to war to “save great Serbia and proud Croatia” while they had Yugoslavia which was a mixture of everything.

However, two years ago, one of my friends attacked me when I mentioned how much I love Belgrade. I remember sitting at the café in Visoko (near Sarajevo) with my Bosnian friends when suddenly one of them started arguing that “we” (Serbians) killed his father. I was so ashamed and angry at the same time. If someone asked me, or my family, his father would still be alive. However, I did not focus on that. Instead I tried to explain him that war started like that, because someone wanted us to perceive “ourselves” as “us” and “others” as “them” and that if we were strong enough to recognize that and fight against leaders’ intention instead of against each other, maybe we would all be “us” even today. Then I left because no matter the support I had from other people who sat at the table and no matter how strong I believed that what I said was right, the feeling of being ashamed was stronger than anything else. That could have been my father. Would I bear negative emotions towards someone who killed my father even if that person did not actually commit the crime but is just representing the government? Unfortunately, I am not so certain that I could see the situation objectively either. I understood him but I did not want him to see me as enemy but as someone who would help him if he needed it, just as it was the case among people before the war. I did it. He ran after me and said that I was right and he was sorry for attacking me. I looked at him thinking how strong he was to go over the fact that my government made him suffer so much and still accept me as if that never happened. From time to time I am wondering if I would be strong enough to do the same.

*Conclusion*

Twenty years have passed since the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ceased to exist. Some people will always have hard time accepting this fact; others do not remember it and do not seem to care as much. The biggest group is those who accepted the situation and moved on but are occasionally coming back to that topic with smiles on their faces. Although I grew up in Serbia I do not remember everything that happened in Yugoslavia, the country in which I was born but am trying to take a peek at that period through books. This time the puzzle of how Yugoslavia was destroyed is solved.

Indeed, history takes a huge part of it. Judah and Veljkovic are right to say that the past wars and victims from those wars negatively influenced developments in Yugoslavia by waking up the collective memories of the nations that constituted it. They are even more right when they say that political leaders, Izetbegovic, Tudjman and Milosevic played well on those memories. Further, Secretary Albright and Susan Woodward correctly add the international part of the story. The international community with its (in)actions helped exacerbate the violent dissolution. They should have been better informed before they made the decision to recognize Slovenia, Bosnia and Croatia. Before the recognition, great powers should have had developed the plan of how to protect the civilians if the war breaks out. However, they did not have any plan; the war in Yugoslavia was not on their list of priorities for long into the war.

Nonetheless, if Milosevic, Tudjman and Izetbegovic did not want to send their people to fight no one could have made them do that. Collective memory is not necessarily a problem. Someone needs to use it aggressively as a tool to achieve “higher interests” and only then we may witness a conflict. What happened in the past is not going to produce new conflicts by itself unless someone does not use history in the manner which will cause a war. Even if those memories become a problem, leaders should be there to manage the conflict, not to make it worse. In response to Albright and Woodward, no matter that great powers did not pay enough attention or even made the war easier, one cannot blame the others for problems that person has at his home. In other words, it would be easy to say that the international community needed to do a better job, but no. Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia had their leaders, they knew better. They should have been prepared and they were. Unfortunately, not to solve the problem but to use it to achieve their goals and grab as much power as they could not even thinking about the price that civilians were paying.

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