

Executive Summary

Independence and the Fate of Minorities (1991-1992) focuses primarily on five questions: Why was the minority question important; how real was the threat to Serb minorities in Bosnia and Croatia; what was the impact of Alija Izetbegović's commitment to Islam; how did leadership affect the issues; and what were the implications of the Badinter Commission's rulings?

According to the report, Yugoslav communists attempted to define minority issues as no longer relevant to progressive socialism. The constituent peoples of the six Yugoslav republics were termed nations, and the smaller peoples were called nationalities. The term "minority" became negatively linked with the ideas of nationalism, parliament, and electoral democracy as throwbacks to an obsolete past. When socialism collapsed, fear of losing their status as a constituent people led some Serbs (and some Kosovars) to object to their new status as minorities in Croatia and Bosnia (and in the Kosovar case, in Serbia). This outcome was not surprising, since similar events had happened during the past century elsewhere in Europe. In the Yugoslav case, however, the change to minority status led to conflict and eventually war.

In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Croatian minority was divided as to how to best protect themselves. Some Croats felt that supporting a unified Bosnia-Herzegovina would provide for the best hope for their community's future. Others, particularly those living in Croat-dominated regions of Herzegovina disagreed and favored joining with the newly created state of Croatia, or at the least creating their own autonomous region within Bosnia-Herzegovina. The question of Croatia's minorities in Bosnia-Herzegovina ultimately was put to rest, after considerable violence, through the Washington Agreement in 1994.

Central to the issue of minorities in the former Yugoslavia was the new status of the Serbs in Yugoslavia's successor states. As Croatia broke away from Yugoslavia, a sizeable Serbian minority was left within its borders. More than half of the Serbs in Croatia were semi-assimilated urban residents, and they tended to support civil democracy, at least before the outbreak of hostilities. Serbs in less developed areas, however, were quick to support the nationalizing leadership in Belgrade. Calls for protection from the allegedly neo-fascist government in Croatia among these irredentist communities played into the hands of nationalist politicians in Belgrade. According to the report, "It was primarily [these] Serbs who justified their aggressive policies by refusing to accept minority status." The Serbian populations of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina eventually created their own autonomous regions with the assistance of the JNA. The result was widespread violence, ethnic cleansing, and massive dislocations of refugees. Ultimately, these projects of national consolidation would only be stopped through the intervention of the international community.

One of the most effective propaganda campaigns of the war was the accusation made by nationalist Serbs that the leader of Bosnia, Alija Izetbegović, was a fundamentalist Muslim who would oppress Serbs. After an extensive review of Izetbegović's work and career, the report concludes that such claims were unwarranted despite being widely held. Though Izetbegović had participated in Islamic national groups in his youth and his actions showed that he was a devoted Muslim, the report argues that it is more accurate to understand him as being a force for modernization rather than Islamic fundamentalism. While Izetbegović did advocate a return to the moral principles of Islam, his true objective was to encourage a modernization of the Islamic world through commitment to the ethnical basis of Islamic faith and through the same work ethic he saw bringing success to the West. Although Izetbegović made a few statements that gave the Serbian population reason for concern, the telling sign that he maintained a Bosnian nationalist rather than pursuing a fundamentalist Islamic agenda was his refusal to seize the opportunity to actualize one when it came. Thus, the report concludes it is unfair to say that Izetbegović presented the threat to the Bosnian Serbs that he was often accused of being.

The report also discusses the leadership provided by Radovan Karadžić, Franjo Tudjman, and Slobodan Milošević. Karadžić is characterized as an intransigent and narrow Serbian nationalist who wanted Serbs to take by force what he considers their due. The thoroughness with which his radical views permeated his party is shown by a report by Gojko Mišković on a reconciliation meeting in 1991, which failed due to the hostile and contentious tone of the Serbian participants. The report sees Tudjman as providing hard-edged leadership in pursuit of narrow nationalist aims that alienated both the Croatian Serbs and the international community. Milošević was the most complex and able leader. Not a nationalist by conviction, he turned nationalism to his use in what appears to have been his main goal: obtain and keep power. One of his methods was control of the media, which produced tendentious and inflammatory reports (as did Tudjman's media in Croatia). Still, ethnic hostility was not manufactured out of whole cloth, especially in regard to Serb-Muslim relations. Nevertheless, Karadžić, Tudjman, and Milošević bear a heavy burden of responsibility, the report contends.

When hostilities broke out, the European powers, made confident by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the impending creation of the European Union, and the unification of Germany, felt they could handle the problem, despite ignorance at the top about conditions in the former Yugoslavia. The United States held back. A key moment in the negotiations conducted by Peter Lord Carrington's Conference on Yugoslavia came in October/November 1991. At that point, five of the six republics/states accepted a draft proposal that committed them to "universal, objective standards" protecting human rights and guaranteeing borders. Serbia rejected the plan, believing that the international community in fact would not be able to protect the rights of Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia.

The report then discusses the various decisions of the Badinter Commission, such as that Yugoslavia was in a process of dissolution so that Croatia and Slovenia were not seceding, and that Serbs in Croatia were a minority and thus under international law not permitted to secede. The recognition issue is discussed, as is the decision that the borders of the new entities would have to remain those of the former Yugoslav republics. The report maintains that the Badinter Commission had to make the best of a volatile situation within a very short time-frame. In the long run, one of the unintended positive consequences of the commission's work was to bring the contradiction between the right of self-determination and the necessity to maintain state borders into clearer focus. In the 1990s, this issue was at least theoretically resolved by redefining self-determination as possible only within the confines of an existing state. The report then discusses some of the contradictions in the commission's work, especially the muddled reasoning behind "curiously technical" call for a referendum on independence in Bosnia. In essence, the report concludes, the commission "accepted the Serbian position that the Serbs should not become a minority in a united Bosnia," an outcome probably not consistent with what it wanted to encourage.

The report agrees with the conventional wisdom that the international community handled the tensions attendant on the breakup of Yugoslavia poorly. "It is vital to recognize, however, that Europe did not create these tensions, was not responsible for the acts of those who instigated or carried out the wars, or for the ethnic cleansings, atrocities, and mutilations that characterized them." The report concludes that "it is difficult to see how any leadership could have saved socialist Yugoslavia or reconstituted its republics into new states without serious conflict."