



# West of the War

**Croatia feels like Europe, but to Europe it's elsewhere.**

**“W**e don't really consider it a Balkan country,” insists a German fellow-tourist and professor of Slavic languages. “It was part of Austria-Hungary, you know.”

Having no desire to join in the inevitable debate about Central versus Eastern Europe (a debate I would necessarily lose, if not lose track of entirely, if forced to continue in the Hamburger's native tongue), I quickly change the subject from culture and politics to scenery. “Did you manage to see the old city this morning?”

“Beautiful. The Venetians called it Ragusa, you know. Of course Dubrovnik and the whole of the Dalmatian coast remain somewhat Italian in character. The north, more Alpine. Zagreb certainly attempts to emulate Vienna—with some success.” The professor smiles mischievously, unwilling to abandon his theme.

Croatia may be more “European” than the rest of the Balkans, but it cannot escape the effects of regional conflict, even when the country itself is at peace. The Kosovo war is making the transition to post-Communism even more difficult than it would have been. During the Easter holiday, half of reservations, most by Austrian and German vacationers, were canceled in Croatia; out of 30,000 tourists expected in Dubrovnik, 400 arrived. Prospects for the normally busy summer season are equally dismal. According to a recent study by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, the NATO action in Yugoslavia could also

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diminish investors' confidence, further slowing economic reforms.

In a country that earns most of its livelihood through tourism, the summer cancellations have been particularly destructive to the fledgling market economy. Dubrovnik, the twelfth-century walled city famed for its Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque churches, synagogues, monasteries, palaces, and fountains (as well as pristine pebble beaches), managed to recover from massive shelling by Serb forces earlier in the decade. But the current neighboring conflict may be driving just as many visitors from the summer resort. “It's an image problem mostly,” insists a tour guide to the nearby island of Korcula, the reputed birthplace of Marco Polo. “We're seen as

part of the Balkans. That word secures our fate more than a thousand years of history and culture ever can.”

At the outset of the NATO action against Yugoslavia, Lloyds of London, the British insurer, declared Croatia part of a war zone, a pronouncement which increased insurance costs for companies and individuals doing business in the country. While Greece and Italy were able to nullify similar decisions, Croatia lacked the diplomatic leverage of the two

NATO countries. Lloyds later reconsidered and decided that only Dubrovnik, 30 miles from the Montenegrin port city of Bar, would be considered part of the Balkan war zone.

“It doesn't help when cruise ships now instead go to the Italian side [of the Adriatic],” protests a Dubrovnik hotel receptionist. “How is this fair when part of Italy is actually closer to the bombing than Croatia is?”

**S**uch heavy-handedness toward Croatia on the part of Western countries, compounded with an official unemployment rate of 17.6 percent, adds to



A bastion of civilization: 15th-century artillery on Korcula.

the pessimism experienced here by a generation of people who thought the end of Communism would initiate a natural transition to prosperity. “Our generation remembers how it was before Tito finally died,” declares a physician in her late twenties. “We just assumed things would change more rapidly after independence was won, that anyone willing and able to work would have the opportunity. Now you have to have connections just to get a job digging ditches in the countryside.”

Medimurje, a northern farming region of Croatia that borders Hungary, is scattered with rolling hills and prairies dotted with bright red poppies and blue cornflowers. After a late night reading of the Tarot, we slip away to Madame Dara's tiny yellow two-room cottage for a cup of Turkish coffee. The black-haired widow, renowned in the village for inspecting the dregs of each visitor's cup of the pungent brew, has shared her knowledge of the future with avid listeners for decades. After drinking the bitter liquid until only the thick sediment of the grounds remain, visitors invert their cups onto saucers to allow shapes from the future to drip into the present. Her eyes turn more than once to the crucifix on the wall, with palms from last Easter drying to a pale yellow behind it, as she speaks of *sudbina*—fate. She sees in the drippings everything from the number of future progeny one may expect, to the return of former lovers, and travel to distant lands. But what of free will? Are any decisions left in human hands?

"Of course we have choices to make. Certain moments arise when we are expected to choose one path over another. But the rest..." She shrugs, "*Sudbina*."

That fate is now ironically tied to Yugoslavia's current problems. "We thought we would finally have peace from the Serbs, but again more problems," a teenager sighs wearily. "I remember the first night the bombing started. I was scared that NATO would make some mistake and bomb us instead. You have to be ready for misfortune to happen when you have such neighbors."

Misfortune such as the imprisonment of Croatian journalist Antun Masle, one of many foreign journalists and aid workers accused of espionage for NATO by Serb forces in Montenegro, is becoming more frequent. A reporter for Croatia's *Globus* weekly newspaper for 15 years, Masle was the last foreign correspondent to leave Chechnya in 1994 and reported on the Slovenian, Croatian, and Bosnian wars for independence. Croatian authorities are demanding his immediate release.

But despite difficulties, Croatia continues to persevere in democratic and market reforms. Croatia is a stable democracy, maintains a free press, and has little international debt. Economic growth is

at 6.5 percent a year, behind only Poland and Estonia in Eastern Europe, and inflation remains at a moderate 5.4 percent.

A short train ride from the slumbering plains of the north, Zagreb is a lively middle European capital, reminiscent indeed of Vienna or Budapest. The yellow and rose-colored theaters and museums constructed by the Hapsburgs, along with the turn-of-the-century streetcars, create an impression of civilization and refinement, of a time before world wars or ethnic cleansing.

Ban Jelacic Square, named for the nineteenth-century Croatian Viceroy (*Ban*) Josip Jelacic who fought the Hungarians and continued Croatia's alliance with Vienna, saw the return of the nobleman's statue in 1991 when the country declared independence from Yugoslavia. This military hero of the 1848 revolutions also abolished tenant farming seventeen years before slavery was outlawed in the United States. His equestrian statue was banished by the Yugoslav communists for fear that it would become a rallying point for Croatian independence.

A middle-aged man gestures toward the bronze horse and rider. "Finally he has his rightful place again, connecting us to the West," he declares. "But it is the West rather than the Serbs that now keeps us from making progress." Indeed the implications of the most recent Balkan crisis have dimmed the initially exuberant mood of Ban Jelacic Square, which witnessed cafes and restaurants filled to overflowing with revelers on the first night of NATO bombing. Celebration fatigue and economic concerns have combined to bring about a more subdued atmosphere in the city center.

**S**outh of Zagreb and seemingly out of reach of political concerns, travelers encounter Croatia's alpine central region. In a tranquil valley between forested mountains lie the Plitvice Lakes, now a national park, having been entered in the UNESCO Register of World Natural Heritage in 1971. Through the sedimentation of calcium and magnesium carbonates and the work of algae and moss, *tufa*, or travertine, has been deposited to form the natural dams that separate the sixteen crystalline, blue-green lakes connected by waterfalls.

Fearing to have been mined by the Yugoslav army in the early 1990's, the park is finally seeing a resurgence in tourism, although mostly domestic at present. The lakes once attracted a million annual visitors from across Europe and the world, but this year's are mostly Croatian children on a final field trip before the end of school. "My dad brings my brother and me here every year now that it's safe," comments one 12-year-old in a red Nike warm-up suit. "Last year there were lots of British people," she adds. "We learn English in school, so I can tell. But this year they're gone. Probably they're scared of the war."

Pula, in Istria at the northern end of the Adriatic coastline, lacks even the children in brightly-colored sportswear. On an overcast day, the city known for having the best-preserved Roman amphitheater in the world is eerily gray and silent. "The legend says that Hercules was Pula's first protector, and that his spirit still keeps invaders away," claims the owner of a nearby seaside cafe. Although over 1,700 km from the nearest NATO military activity, the 2,000-year-old arena where gladiators once did battle is experiencing its first tourist drought since Croatia's war for independence.

Slightly further down the coast, Opatija, made up almost entirely of Hapsburg villas, is equally deserted, as if the spirit of another ancient hero holds visitors at bay. The geranium-laden balconies overlooking the Adriatic, normally saturated with complacent travelers sipping espresso or the native wine, are now burdened with locals worried about their livelihood.

South of Opatija is Rijeka, an industrial city known mostly for humid, rainy weather and not normally a tourist mecca. Just outside of it is Trsat, which attracts many more visitors, few of them foreign. A sanctuary of the Virgin Mary, Trsat receives pilgrims daily. Most light yellow or red candles for fulfillment of prayers, and some leave offerings to the Virgin in the devotional room. A Franciscan priest explains the legend this way: Along with the sanctuary in Loreto, Italy, Trsat marks symbolically the diffusion of the spiritual legacy of "Mary of Nazareth." The Holy House was moved here from Palestine in 1291 and then further west to Loreto in 1294.

"But both are part of the same tradition," emphasizes the clergyman. ❧



# A Phony Alliance

**The U.S. fights for Europe while the E.U. fights America.**

**T**he USA has a strange habit of fighting the wrong enemy and ignoring the right one. Conservatives, sadly, have not been immune to this, though they have a better record than liberals in learning from their mistakes.

In the early years of Soviet global power after World War II, many in the U.S. ludicrously saw Great Britain and her bankrupt empire as a more dangerous rival than Stalin. Perhaps the lingering memory of the White House in flames in 1813 will always keep British and American conservatives further apart than they ought to be. The exposure of the real and repellent nature of the Soviet empire, by such writers as Arthur Koestler, together with the struggle for Berlin and the string of coups and takeovers across Eastern Europe, eventually persuaded those on the right that Moscow presented a profound and serious threat not just to American power but to everything America stood for. Yet, having recovered from one foolish mistake, American conservatives moved on to make another. During the long decline of the USSR, they failed to see the power of the cultural revolution that was trashing thought, literature, and morals in the West's universities, churches, and media. Now, weakened by that cultural revolution, the USA squanders its prestige in futile combat with puny tyrants in the Balkans and the Middle East, while actively encouraging the

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growth and consolidation of a new and resentful rival: the European Union.

It seems to be the settled view of the State Department that the E.U., which until recently was supposed to be nothing more than a trading bloc, should be encouraged to solidify into a superstate. Worse, those nations in Europe that are wary of joining this monster get no sympathy from the U.S., which seems rather to like the idea that "Europe" should have one address, supposedly so that it is easier to deal with. Much of the recent diplomacy over the Balkans has been designed to encourage the notion that there is a political entity called "Europe" which should learn to police its own problems. The truth—that the military operations against Serbia have been almost entirely American—has been deliberately obscured by the pretense that it is a joint American-European assault under the NATO flag.

This is a multiple fantasy. Without American forces, NATO is a military weakling. And as the historian Timothy Garton Ash has pointed out, Europe has changed its borders more often than Africa in the last hundred years. It has not been a political unit since the fall of the Roman Empire. Even then, its boundaries enclosed only part of the continent, which has no clearly defined limits but is generally thought to extend from the shores of the Atlantic to the disappointingly unspectacular range of hills known as the Ural Mountains. Within that space run a number of frontiers, some economic, some physical, some linguistic, some religious, all of them making nonsense of the idea that there

can be a United States of Europe as there is a United States of America. A man who loses his job in Dublin cannot simply sell his house, put all his goods in a U-Haul truck and drive to Athens or Milan. The language, laws, schooling, and culture are so different that he would need to undergo a four-year immersion course to cope when he got there. If he went further in any direction, the problems would be even greater. As well as more languages than I can count, Europe has three distinct alphabets. If you include the Caucasus region, make that five alphabets.

Only two of those alphabets are currently recognized in the European Union, which is an unequal alliance between a resurgent Germany and a declining France, together with their client states and a hesitant and isolated Britain. The E.U. also excludes the Slav nations and—no matter what you may hear—is likely to carry on doing so. The interesting thing, from an American point of view, is what holds the whole thing together. The E.U. is a socialist superstate in the making, a return to the gradual, non-revolutionary, bureaucratic top-downwards socialism of Europe before Lenin and the Bolsheviks held their 1917 *coup d'état* in Petrograd.

Almost everything is subsidized, even rabbit-breeding. Almost everything is protected, especially jobs. This has the unintended effect of keeping millions of people permanently unemployed because nobody dares to hire them on account of the difficulty of firing them and the costs of paying for holidays, health, and other compulsory extras. The agricultural handouts are so generous (to agri-business) that one year's tax-financed largesse could pay to cover the entire E.U. land mass in top-quality