The Forgotten War Crimes

State Sovereignty,

Ethnic Cleansing,

and the Autonomist Revolution

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For Sosa

everywhere
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Introduction

The ordering of the international system is directly responsible for countless genocides and ethnic cleansing, at minimum 200,000,000 violent deaths, and an incalculable but likely equal number of nonviolent preventable casualties. We are, however, approaching a threshold, globally, as we have many times before. This text seeks to finally highlight and rectify four of what this author views as the twentieth century’s most major opportunities, truly critical moments that could have changed statecraft on a global scale, though in fact these opportunities have been missed regularly for the past 300 years.

One hundred years prior to this study, a bullet from the gun of a Serbian civilian went through the neck of an Austrian autocrat in a country that belonged to neither of them, all in the name of self-determination. The governing system of global order that caused the First World War to erupt from that single gunshot can be linked to a similar European-wide conflict 250 years earlier that had killed another 10,000,000 people over the course of 80 years. Everything from the end of the Thirty Years War leading up to the death of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was missed opportunity number one.
The assassination sparked a global conflict between power-hungry central regimes in enormous empires across Europe, Asia and North America that, by the time it ended four years later, had reached every continent, killed over sixteen million people, and toppled half of the aforementioned empires. At this endpoint, the series of vengeful treaties that penalized peoples as much as powers is missed opportunity number two.¹

Instead of learning from the preceding quarter millennium of conflict, the system remained just as it was for another thirty years. When the Second World War ended, after the deaths of another almost eighty million people, the leaders of the world’s remaining great nations declared that this would never happen again, but the next round of treaties that once more failed to alter the

¹ Hannah Arendt synopsized this failure as follows in *Eichmann In Jerusalem*: “The belt of mixed population that stretches from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Adriatic in the south... then consisted of the so-called Successor States, established by the victorious powers after the First World War. A new political order was granted to the numerous ethnic groups that had lived for centuries under the domination of [the losing empires]... Of the nation-states that resulted, none possessed anything even approaching the ethnic homogeneity of the old European nations that had served as models for their political constitutions. The result was that each of these countries contained large ethnic groups that were violently hostile to the ruling government because their own national aspirations had been frustrated in favor of their only slightly more numerous neighbors. If any proof of the political instability of these recently founded states had been needed, the case of Czechoslovakia amply provided it. When Hitler marched into Prague, in March, 1939, he was enthusiastically welcomed not only by the Sudetendeutschen, the German minority, but also by the Slovaks, whom he ‘liberated’ by offering them an ‘independent’ state. Exactly the same thing happened later in Yugoslavia, where the Serbian majority, the former rulers of the country, was treated as the enemy, and the Croatian minority was given its own national government. Moreover, because the populations in these regions fluctuated, there existed no natural or historical boundaries, and those that had been established by the Treaties of Trianon and St. Germain were quite arbitrary...”
structural instability and inequity while creating, to much fanfare, the United Nations system in order to give lip service to these inequities, was missed opportunity number three.

It was a little more than forty years and tens of millions more deaths before the Soviet Union fell and the world failed spectacularly to seize the moment to build a new form of interaction between states and their people. What was hailed as The End of History was in fact missed opportunity number four.

If instead of a century of imperial wars of revenge, the great powers of each of these times had listened to the calls throughout their empires for the same kind of autonomy that Gavrilo Princip demanded in Sarajevo, the vast majority of these two hundred million deaths in war and governmental crimes could have been prevented. Instead, today an Austrian autocrat with absolute power is once again threatening the Serbian minority of Bosnia with violence, war is looming between East and West in Ukraine, and the same system of pure sovereignty mixed with pure ethnic statehood that has for centuries doomed humanity to war remains unchallenged.

This project, eight years in the making, could have gone on indefinitely in documenting these crimes and the movements to rectify them, but 2014 turned out to be a critical turning point for autonomy and sovereignty. Putin’s Russian incursion into Ukraine is interrelated with
the bloodshed unleashed by the militants of Islamic State in Syria and Turkey, both of which are in fact closely tied, though none of the parties may recognize or admit this, with elections in Scotland and Crimea, all of which is interrelated to the goings on throughout the states of the former Yugoslavia. Providing and publicizing proof of this systemic interconnectedness was more important than completing additional data sets atop the years’ worth of data already collected.

This is not a conspiracy theory, merely a consequence of the same foolhardy theory that has governed Europe for three hundred years and plagued the entire world for the past century. The compartmentalization of the world into simple ethnic nation-states, the destruction of interculturality, multiculturalism and heterogeneity, a process that peaked but did not end with the annihilation in the Holocaust of all those who didn’t fit, what Hannah Arendt called stateless peoples, is nearing its final stages as these interconnected examples will show. This vicious homogenization is the forgotten war crime from which this book takes its name, crimes insidious and institutional, yet so ingrained in our systems of global governance and our modes of international engagement as to remain entirely unnoticed, never to result in a Hague tribunal. The basic foundational treaties of the 20th century, Versailles, Lusane, and Trianon, are all
expressions of this process: Pure (or at least majority) ethnic states with pure sovereign borders and powerful central authorities treated by the international community as the pure, singular sovereign leader of all those within those borders. This system is a recipe for oppression, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. It’s been twenty years since our last major missed opportunity, and given the military developments in the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe, and the economic development in the world’s most major states, we are approaching either missed opportunity number five, The Big One, or our proudest moment, the moment we stop aiding and abetting genocide, the moment we end the structural mandate for violence and ethnic cleansing as foundational steps in the state-building process and begin building human rights safeguards into the constitutions of those states and governments that will emerge from the current spate of conflicts raging across the globe.

What follows are a series of case studies and alternative theories through which the best methods for preventing governmental excess and ensuring human rights will be explored. The historical points will be proven through the use of one primary case study, the region of Vojvodina in what is today northern Serbia, and more than a dozen supporting cases, each case an autonomist movement within a larger sovereign state. These cases are organized not by region but by the
dynamics and methods used by the movements, ranging from peaceful to violent based on the difference in success these approaches have brought about. To understand how broken the existing system of international order truly is, this study begins in the former Yugoslavia. But as with all things that start in the Balkans, it doesn’t end there.
Section 1: The Balkan Undead

The blackened skeleton blends in almost completely with the flame licked walls. I suppose he looked about the same, if a bit less crisp, when he stormed the embassy the night before in head-to-toe black, shoes to balaclava. He was a Serb, a proud nationalist, and those filthy mud-blood Americans, not even a decade past the bombing of his country, now recognized the false state of Kosovo. Named Kosovo, after the Serbian word for blackbird, for the Field of Blackbirds, where the great Serb king Lazar and his troops lost the final battle to the Ottoman Turks and the dark birds descended to devour their flesh over 600 years ago, this was Serbian land. Although accidental, our skeleton’s sacrifice in the name of defiance to a world that sought to erase his history would have made him proud, had he lived to see it. It was his plan to live to see it, of course. He was a Serb, and cowardly suicide bombings were never the Serbian way. He intended to stay alive to watch the flames destroy the American embassy and hear the screams of those imperialist pig dogs. Only he missed while lighting the Molotov Cocktail. And now he was a martyr.

There is no better study of the drive for self-determination and the need for an altered approach to national sovereignty and the way international institutions
and relations function than the Balkan Peninsula. Go back far enough in the Balkans, you can always find a crime worth dying for, a crime worth sacrificing for, and most importantly a crime worth killing for. The constant oppression, mysticism, legend and sheer pessimism of a land so long the crux of world conflict has created a glaring blind-spot to their perspectives, however: very few can see a cause, a legacy, worth living for.

Such a tone in one’s writing as the two paragraphs above paint a brutal, savage picture of some of the states that have emerged from the former Yugoslavia, and that description is an oft-and-deservedly-criticized practice. There is a very well-respected argument among Balkanologists, made most soundly by Maria Todorova in *Imagining The Balkans*, that the treatment of the Balkans as savage land is a flipped version of what Edward Said termed Orientalism. In Orientalism, as an extremely simplified explanation, the cultures, traditions and peoples of Asia are given a specially, positively fetishized position, wherein the languages and teachings are viewed as especially profound, the peoples especially noble, the women sensualized. It is a form of racism in which the peoples, by virtue of their honored status, are not viewed as humans but as an exotic other. On the other hand, what Todorova terms Balkanism views the cultures and teachings of the Balkans as backwards and archaic, the languages rough and the people shown as brutal savages.
Both Orientalism and Balkanism are viewed as methods of transmitting a concept of Western culture as the norm and all other cultures as exotic and abnormal. There is no doubt that such a perspective is prominent in Western journalism and writing on the region, the Anglophonic, Francophonic and Germanic media portraying the Balkans at least as unkindly as the previous paragraphs.

The problem of Balkanism comes from the concept that the nations of Western Europe and North America are somehow better. The atrocities of Serbia and Croatia can barely be seen as worse than British excesses in India or Northern Ireland, surely no worse than the Australian, Canadian or American treatment of their indigenous peoples, or American excesses in Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Vietnam or Laos. In the pages that follow, I’ll be writing about near-death experiences on the streets of Bosnia and Romania, while never claiming that someone couldn’t find similar stories on the streets of Baltimore, USA\(^\text{ii}\), the city of only 600,000 people whose 300 murders per year on average make it statistically safer to be a soldier on active duty in Afghanistan than a resident of the city. I’ll be covering corruption in Serbia and Kosovo, never ignoring that this city of my origin suffers the corruption of dynastic one-party rule, with embezzlement and cronyism on a par with the Balkans. I’ll be going into great depth on

\(^{\text{ii}}\) For just one example among hundreds of terrible cases throughout the domestic politics of the Western world.
ethnically-driven atrocities throughout Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia, while remembering that the poverty and murder that runs rampant through Baltimore is disproportionately (and arguably intentionally) aimed at one race of people, and that of course the same can be written of Detroit and several other US cities.

The problem with accusations of Balkanism, however, is that this explanation also serves as an excuse for Balkan excess, a shield against well-deserved criticism of the states of the former Yugoslavia. That the savagery is no worse than Western savagery of only 40 or 50 years earlier in no way makes it civilized, acceptable, or even un-noteworthy. The West is not without fault, and in fact the final section of this book deals as heavily with American and “Western” crimes as the first half deals with Balkan atrocities, but if we waited for the sinless state to cast the first stone, we’d be waiting until the end of nations. If no Anglophonic writer is therefore permitted to criticize the savagery of Balkan crimes, a dangerous dearth of actionable knowledge then allows for ethnic cleansing like those about which you will read in the second section of this text.

This book deals a lot with ethnicity: ethnic cleansing, ethnic purity, ethnic nationalist, ethnic statehood and so on. Defining ethnicity is incredibly tricky. The US census summarizes the dominant perception by social scientists in declaring that “race and
ethnicity are complex, multifaceted constructs”\(^2\), and this is no doubt true. However, despite ethnicity’s constructed nature, it is the excuse for incredible savagery and lazy politics and as such its power deserves decent study and acknowledgement. This text does not seek to define ethnicity as that can only be done by the self-identifying members of the in-group itself, but as ethnicity is at the core of popular support for the recent conflicts in the Balkans, and every conflict detailed within this book, the facts behind these self-identifications are worthy of further study.

Somewhere around 1,500 years ago, the South Slavic, or Yugoslav, tribes arrived in the Balkans. Ethnically, the Serbs, Croats and Bosnians are indeed very closely related to the point of being basically the same people. Don’t tell them that. They’ll call you all sorts of nasty names, curse you horribly, and, depending on your proximity to them at the time of insult and the amount of alcohol involved, may express their disagreement physically. There are all kinds of theories as to where the tribes came from, each theory with its own agenda. Slavic identity is an ideal example of the creation of ethnicity narratives, and an impressive piece of evidence in the argument that “ancient ethnic hatreds” was a bullshit construct created by power-hungry politicians.\(^{iii}\)

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\(^{iii}\) Florin Curta posits that “Slavs… did not come from the North, but became Slavs only in contact with the Roman frontier.” This is a direct challenge of “traditional
Wherever they came from, the Serbs settled East, the Croats in the West, instituting largely similar cultures until invaders and missionaries moved in. For the Croats, it was the Franks under Charlemagne that moved them quickly towards Catholicism, for the Serbs it was the Eastern Orthodox missionaries. More simply, a similar-to-identical Slavic-speaking group fell under differing religious influences that shaped differing identities, these identities having nothing to do with biology or ethnicity, and they maintained overlapping languages, even under both Austro-Hungarian and Turkish imperial rule. The term Bosnian itself does not appear until the 15th century, an initially geographic, not ethnic or religious, distinction. The Bosnians were merely Slavs in the geographic region known as Bosnia. Bosnian became its own identity with the invasions, mass conversions and everything else that came with oppression by the Turks and Hungarians. Miraculous new hybrids of religion emerged, if only briefly, and a vibrant culture was created (and crushed) by this co-mingling of empires. Macedonia, one of these vibrant regions, is according to regional scholars the inspiration for the French word for Mixed Salad from its 19th century status as Europe’s clusterfuck, a no-man’s-

historiographical interpretation, which tended to lump these two groups [Sclavenes and Antes]” whose own identities were a Byzantine construct, Curta notes, “under one single denomination, on the often implicit assumption that the Slavs were the initial root from which sprung all Slavic-speaking nations of later times.” His premise is that the use of weak evidence from trade routes and fallible ancient linguistic records created false history of Slavic identity.
land of Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish hatred, fanned by the flames of Serb mercenaries from the north and Russian funds from the east, a disputed nation whose paramilitary ransoms, assassinations, rapes and massacres set the standard for the violence that would tear the region apart nearly a century later.

Fast forward now to 1917, the Corfu declaration created what would become the state of Yugoslavia, declaring the Serb, Croat and Slovene ethnicities “the same by blood, by language, by the feelings of their unity, by the continuity and integrity of the territory which they inhabit undivided, and by the common vital interests of their national survival and manifold development of their moral and material life.” This unity was disrupted two decades later when the Nazis occupied Yugoslavia, the Croats joining the occupiers and attempting the genocide of the Serbs. Following the hundreds of thousands of deaths and deportations, Yugoslavia was recreated after the war, divided into six ethnic republics and two autonomous ethnic regions, inclusive of many ethnicities that had not previously been a part of the union.

To explore any further than this the history of the Balkans would be an exercise in futility. Franks, Romans, Turks, Hungarians, Habsburgs, Germans, and countless

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\[iv\] Not to mention that it was already done pithily but thoroughly for the recent history of the whole of Central and Eastern Europe by Hannah Arendt in chapters IX-XII of *Eichmann In Jerusalem.*
other external forces conquered, ruled, and slaughtered the Balkan peoples. And Bulgarians, Macedonians, Serbs, Croats and Albanians all tried their own hands at subjugating their neighbors. More than a millennium of conquest, shifting borders and bloodshed, yet we’re still no closer to determining root causes or even solid histories. And there was indeed a beautiful 40 year peace that took the region under the dictator Tito, but that ended with bloodshed the likes of which Europe had not seen since the 1940s.

The death of Tito was a tragedy for Yugoslavia. He was Comrade, Father, Leader, Godhead. Comrade Tito led Yugoslavia out of the hold of fascism, imperial domination and genocide. He and his top advisors maneuvered his country carefully between communism and capitalism. They were the most free and happy people of Eastern Europe. Tito had given Yugoslavia everything. Now he was gone. There was no charismatic leader poised to take his place. There had been no talent bred and raised for post-Tito navigation. There were merely the uncharismatic leaders of the Communist Parties of the six autonomous republics within Yugoslavia.

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v No different than most of Europe but for some reason the history here is even less generally agreed upon.
vi “Beautiful peace” is of course a relative term, which is to say that relative to their Soviet satellite neighbors in post-war Europe, Tito’s regime sending only around 30,000 prisoners to the work camps and murdering a mere 4,000 is nothing to scoff at. Also, please recall the sardonic Balkanism promised in this chapter. This history is a generalization, not comprehensive.
Back when it was still Yugoslavia, a friend of mine tells me, he got a scholarship to Law School in Paris. While studying International Law, he had a professor who presented to the class what he described as “The Perfect Law.” This law, the professor told them, had no loopholes and no flaws. He spent the next hour describing the intricacies of this perfect law. When he was finished, my Yugoslav friend raised his hand and pointed out three different ways to skirt the law. The professor stood there thinking for a few moments and asked “Where are you from?”
“Yugoslavia,” the student replied.
“Ooooooh…” said the professor, “No, this doesn’t apply to you. Loopholes are a way of life for you people.”

It is this mindset that made Yugoslavia the happiest and most successful of the Communist Bloc. Yugoslavia was the best candidate of all Eastern bloc countries to peacefully transition from communism to democracy. As Michael Montgomery described it, “It had an educated labor force, a solid middle class that bridged the gully between the various ethnonational groups, and a sense, albeit fragile, that Yugoslavia was something more than the sum total of its six republics.” 4 Yugoslavia, because of the leadership of Tito, the brilliant negotiation of Yugoslav diplomats, and the skill and artistry of Yugoslav intelligentsia and the creative class, was a world power, though not a great power, and its future should have been
assured. Yet, despite all of the economic and social advances that Tito brought, it was squandered in under a decade following his death in 1980.

Despite the atrocities and tragedies, there is no deep historic ethnic difference between the original Yugoslav tribes. Not only is this a well-documented fact, it was a convenient political truth for Tito and the post-war Yugoslav regime. Further ethnic division guaranteed further bloodshed, whereas common ethnicity meant easier rule and coexistence. Tito himself declared in 1952 “I would like to live to see the day when Yugoslavia would become amalgamated into a firm community, when she would no longer be a formal community but a community of a single Yugoslav nation.”

The common legend of the breakup of Yugoslavia is that the nation was an unsustainable falsehood, incompatible ethnicities bearing seething ancient hatreds against one another forced by a dictator to live as a single community. The Western world was fully willing to embrace this bad pop psychology and accept the nationalists’ actions as historically and politically

vii Though the concept of the Yugoslav, meaning South Slavic, was coined in the 18th century, somehow, with all of these attempts at Yugoslav unity, it was not until 1971 that the Yugoslav administration began using the term in the census. For 20 years, the use of the category Yugoslav existed in the census, and grew exponentially. In 1971, there were 273,077 citizens of the country of Yugoslavia who identified their nationality as “Yugoslav” (Census, 2012). By 1981, that number grew by nearly 450%, to 1,215,000 (Stankovic, 1981). Of the more than 22 million people in the country, that may not seem an impressive number, but it is an impressive show of the capacity for brotherhood, and a wistful reminder that perhaps Yugoslav unity could have been as easily constructed as the hatred that was instead manufactured.
inevitable and proper. A more in-depth, non-commercial investigation, however, such as that done by Robert M. Hayden in 1996, show “that the wars have been about the forced unmixing of peoples whose continuing coexistence was counter to the political ideologies that won the free elections of 1990. Thus extreme nationalism in the former Yugoslavia has not been only a matter of imagining allegedly ‘primordial’ communities, but rather of making existing heterogeneous ones unimaginable.” Nationalist political rhetoric and elections created the reality of ethnic nations where none had previously existed. “The rise of mutually hostile nationalisms led to a sharp decline in the percentage of Yugoslavs throughout the country, from 5.4% in 1981 to 3.0% in 1991-a 41.3% drop.”7 The ethnic classifications did not change, but the self-classifications of the population within those options changed significantly. These changes in self-classification had much to do with increased nationalism throughout Yugoslavia’s constituent republics, but also with fear, as Hayden clarifies from his research: “At the time of the census (April 1991) I was told by a number of people that they would prefer to continue to identify themselves as Yugoslavs but were afraid that doing so could cost them their jobs, and perhaps even their property, in the chauvinist political climate then dominant.”8

What happened next was unthinkable from the most prosperous nation in Eastern Europe. Within 5 years,
unemployment was over 1 million, with an overall jobless rate of nearly 20%. Inflation followed austerity, and with this perfect economic storm came an unprecedented fear. To give a Western parallel, quoting Chris Bennett, assistant high representative and head of the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia, “If David Duke\textsuperscript{viii} were given a monopoly on media and standard of living were to fall 40% in a decade, America would have its Milosevic\textsuperscript{ix}.”\textsuperscript{9} The next chapter in this story was written in blood.

Though rhetorical and military techniques are obvious ethnic cleansers, the leadership in the constituent republics used different tactics as well. In Slovenia, tens of thousands of non-ethnic-Slovene residents were erased from the government registers following the nation’s declaration of statehood in 1991. For these people, now illegal residents in their own homes and villages, for whom work was also outlawed, relocation was often the only option. It took over a decade for the European Court of Human Rights to declare this act illegal\textsuperscript{10}, though it has not yet been rectified by the Slovenian government.

In Croatia, science was, and still is, used to differentiate ethnicities, to tear apart the fragile fabric of interethnicity. Despite science having little, if anything, to

\textsuperscript{viii} Former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, perennial Presidential hopeful, and all-around douchebag.

\textsuperscript{ix} One wonders whether, in the era of US right-wing populism and “news” programs following a harsh economic downturn and slow recovery, this was more prescient than it sarcastically seemed at the time this chapter was written.
do with ethnicity\textsuperscript{x}, the Croatian academy has taken it upon itself to prove otherwise, and to prove, despite the strong evidence in the studies of experts like Florin Curta or Frederick Singleton, the non-Slavic history of their great nation.\textsuperscript{xi}

No side was innocent, and innocents of all sides were similarly victimized, subjected to weaponized rapes, torture and mass slaughter. Sure, they’d all been Yugoslavs a year or two earlier, but they weren’t countrymen now. Today, this history is of no concern. The invented histories of ethnic nationalists and international leaders are today’s reality. They are Croats, or Serbs, or Bosnians, or Albanians. 20, 15, even 10 years ago, militant Croats held signs reading “The only good Serb is a dead Serb” while burning their neighbors in effigy. A Serb matriarch would do her laundry with a rifle slung across her back in case “those Moslem barbarian rapists” came by while she was outside. They weren’t people now. They were The Other. They pick the histories they choose to remember, those histories that place them in the best light

\textsuperscript{x} as shown by the work of the Bioanthropology Research Laboratory at the University of Maryland

\textsuperscript{xi} In his recently publicized state-subsidized study, “Genetic origin of the Croats”, Dr. Ivan Juric, professor at the Zagreb Faculty of Agriculture, drew genetic distinctions between the biology of Serbs and Croats. His findings showed greater similarities in cells of Croatian and Iranian, or what his study refers to as Persian, blood samples, than between Croatians and any Balkan people. The study uses this discovery to make claims about the historical differences between the nations of the Balkans, and to call to the proposed history that Croatia was populated by Illyrian settlers from a long extinct sea. The next census will show whether Illyrian or Persian becomes a valid categorization and who loses out on their right to identify.
or drive them to the greatest passion, forgetting the inconvenient truth that their people, too, have been the villain.

I was originally sent to the former Yugoslavia to explore the funnels of capital that went into the post-conflict rebuilding in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia. What I found was a trail of corruption and oppression that continues to this day. This text is not, primarily, on that corruption, but on the oppression that has accompanied it, centering on a single main post-Yugoslav case study in the second section. What follows in the remaining pages of this section is a series of anecdotes that emerged during my fieldwork, which give life to the often dry explanations of the culture of the Balkans. Understanding the dominant cultures of the region is crucial to a successful peace-building and to an understanding of the oppressed cultures within. This holds true for any region and any peace-building mission, but is too frequently ignored.

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The Rhetoric of Risk, and the Risk of Rhetoric

Slobodan Milosevic had the capacity to ignite civil unrest and bloody massacres with his words. This is well-documented and undoubted.\textsuperscript{11} Yet, if we’re honest with
ourselves\textsuperscript{xii}, Milosevic is himself overshadowed as the Balkan exemplar of fascistic nationalist risk rhetoric by Franjo Tudjman of Croatia. On August 28, 1995, Tudjman delivered a speech on the success of Croatia’s ethnic cleansing of the Serbs from the town of Knin\textsuperscript{12}. “We did not have our own rulers from our own blood since 1522, when it was captured by the Turks and when those who were in our Croatian Knin until yesterday came together with them,” he said of the Serbs,

And from today, this is Croatian Knin. And there can be no return to the past, to the times when they the Serbs were spreading cancer in the heart of Croatia, cancer which was destroying the Croatian national being and which did not allow the Croatian people to be the master in its own house and did not allow Croatia to lead an independent and sovereign life under this wide, blue sky and within the world community of sovereign nations… Here in Knin the Serbs were creating their own Serb state in order to unify it with those Bosnian Serbs and Serbia proper and their Yugoslavia… Here in Knin they were preparing for a long-term war.

But the threat of the Serbs alone could not slice apart Yugoslavia and create the state of Croatia. No, in order to achieve this, dear Croatian brothers and sisters, we had to unite the disunited Croathood. We had to muster all Croatian wit... We had to create our own Croatian Army, our own armed force, with which

\textsuperscript{xii} An admitted rarity in the International Community.
we were capable of defeating the Serbs and convince and prove to the world that we are capable of preserving and ruling our country. This also means that we will know how to value what we conquered at the price of Croatian blood and we shall never allow anyone to jeopardize our freedom, our democracy, our beautiful Croatian land in which there must be room not only for all Croatian people here, but also for all those expelled Croats whom I invited to return...

“Brotherhood and Unity”, Tito’s slogan, took on a whole new meaning with Tudjman. It was a duty for every young Croat, and for the nascent Croat nation as a whole,

It goes without saying that from fertile areas to all these parts we liberated there will be room for all our people, and our nation will celebrate its freedom and build its Croatia for which... too many Croatian people died and too many of our sons suffered in the dungeons of Venice, Vienna, Budapest and Belgrade. Dear Croatian brothers and sisters, I invite you to start on the revival of Knin, so we can populate it, and not just Knin, but also Benkovac, Obrovac and all the area up to the Plitvice lakes and Sisak. We must revive and build the whole of Croatia, so it can become a country of which every Croat can be proud, and all Croats can be from today, a country of wealth and happiness of all Croatian people.

With Tudjman’s masterful use of the rhetoric of dread, there was no room for doubt. Thinkers who espoused the risks of this ethnic nationalism are still today viewed as heretics. Such viewpoints were banned, outlawed, with
the intellectuals who even suggested this heresy, such as Dubravka Ugresic, exiled to the Netherlands and burned in effigy literally as witches.

Of course, to place the blame solely on Croatia is as much an injustice as the treatment that most of the world has given the Serbs, placing blame for mutual war crimes on a single party. Milosevic no doubt played his part. However, where Croatia’s game was entirely ethnic, Serbia’s strongman called to economic and social risks as well.

In Kosovo, four years before the conflict with Croatia, Slobodan Milosevic was already perfecting his rhetorical trade. In the town of Kosovo Polje, there was a demonstration by ethnic Serbs at which he represented the Yugoslav government where he took the side of the Serb nationalists. “No one has the right to beat the people!” he declared of a situation the Serbs had manufactured where it was claimed a Kosovar police officer struck an older man, “No one will ever dare beat you again.”13 With these statements, he lost his position in the Yugoslav government, but gained his messianic post as savior of the Serbs. Most reports show, however, that this alleged beating had never occurred and was simply a tool by Milosevic to undermine Kosovar Albanian authority and paint them as aggressors. “They should know,” he concluded, with no intentional irony, “there will be no tyranny on this soil anymore.”14
After Milosevic and Tudjman were done dividing their peoples through the rhetoric of risk, they then joined forces to discuss the imminent threat of the entirely fabricated Bosnian plan to establish a fundamentalist Muslim state, fighting now as “Brothers in Christ” against the “Turks”. Based on centuries of harmonious co-existence of religions throughout Bosnia, this rhetoric was baseless. Summing up the situation beautifully at a conference in Graz, Austria, in November 2011, Gordana Susa, a leading reporter in pre-war Yugoslavia and a lead dissident during the wars of the 90s, explained:

Multi-ethnic cities were especially targeted. The chief enemy of the JNA [i.e., Yugoslav People’s Army] was common life, coexistence… Living proof that people of different societies living together in one city, working together, that went against the nationalist propaganda that tried to present ethnic communities forced to live together against their wills, torn apart by ancient ethnic hatreds.”

Therefore, In order to match reality to rhetoric, orders were given to the Christian soldiers that ”It [was] not enough to cleanse Mostar of the Muslims ... the relics must also be destroyed.\textsuperscript{15}

The politicians are not wholly to blame, of course. Their citizen-victims followed them willingly, and in post-script blamed the casualties of war on their enemies instead of politicians for entering them into war.
Yugoslavia fell, Croatia rose and became rapidly a model of western ideals, Serbia is both risen and crippled, yet neither have taken stock of the rhetoric, risks, and lies that got them here. The tragedy of Yugoslavia is not that its leaders failed to understand the risks they faced, but that they fully comprehended them, repackaged them to be attractive to the narrative of their ethnic nations, and allowed, even caused, tragedy to befall their countrymen in order to achieve great wealth and legacy.

According to Yugoslav Foreign Minister and modern Croat nationalist Budimir Loncar, there is historical precedent for Croatia’s whitewashing and negligence of their own responsibility in the wars of the 1990s. As he describes the situation, post-Hitler Germany didn’t have to repay the damage of World War Two. They made long-term change and that made everything ok. Of course, this ignored entirely the Nuremberg Trials, the decades of economic reparations paid by the German state, and the entire decades-long process of public debate and working through of historical crimes in every vein of German life, but it’s hard to be both revisionist and logically consistent, and so this was the logic Loncar espoused in 2011 at a keynote speech at a conference in Austria on the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and this is the logic of the Croatian administration, making their history of war crimes fully acceptable as they enter the EU.
Amsterdam

Ironic though it is given the recent history of the Dutch in the Balkans, this city makes perfect sense as the hub of Yugoslav exiles. Walking down the streets, everything appears just slightly off-kilter. It takes miles of walking to recognize that it’s not you. It’s the city itself. It feels initially as though built on a grid, but after enough inexplicable wrong turns you realize, as many expats have described, that it’s built on a rainbow, a colorful description both of its carved-out semi-circular design and the ethereal, ephemeral nature of the city.

The first clue that it’s not you, it’s Amsterdam, comes looking down a more residential block from one end and realizing that none of the houses or buildings are built straight up, nor are any built at the same angle, as though the city’s famous coffeehouses had great influence on the design and construction. But there is method to this hallucinogenic madness, notable by the pulley system atop the house, used instead of stairs to transport furniture and larger objects to the upper floors of the houses. The angling of the houses is intended to avoid damaging the façade during this process. This, along with the unspoken code between bikers and pedestrian that injures many an unfamiliar traveler, the laissez-faire approach to the snow
and ice that coats the town much of the year, and the very strange stigmas and codes attached to the substances of the city, create a very weird society indeed. Tilted houses built on a jagged rainbow with an unspoken and arbitrary code of conduct and a “grin & bear it” approach to hard times, shrouded in a cloud of mood-altering smoke, this city is itself an allegory for the dream and dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The Yugoslav breakup itself can only be viewed through a similarly hazy lens, an orgy of hate and violence so painful and intense, like a solar eclipse, permanently damaging without proper eyewear, the obfuscation of comfortable justification and self-serving lies. Viewing and experiencing Amsterdam without a similar lens is itself unexplainable and discomfiting. I’m told it’s greatly improved through obfuscation.

The civility of today’s debating and conversing on the subject of the former Yugoslavia comes from a settling on a decided discourse that is more often than not a whitewashing from, as Dubravka Ugresicxiii succinctly puts it, a “culture of lies”.17 A discussion of Yugoslav alternatives cannot be hosted by former Yugoslav officials. It merely becomes a rehashing of events with self-justification, blame, victimization, all without imagination. Mixing politicians and academics is a terribly egoistic,

xiii a Croatian dissident herself in exile in Amsterdam
whitewashing, credit-taking endeavor. The rawness of debate 20 years ago was honesty. The pain of the dissolution still, 20 years later, prevents any and all alternatives from being proposed.

The dizzying maze of codes, wobbly politically-invented “languages” that are in fact merely variants of Serbo-Croatian, and the delicate physical and emotional topography of post-Yugoslavia, built on the ruined rainbow of a beautiful dream, covered in smoke, obscured by lies, there could be no better analogy than Amsterdam. Of course, the lax immigration laws of the Netherlands at the start of the conflict may have more to do with the prevalence of Yugoslav immigrants, exiles and refugees in the city, but there are reasons they fit in so well.

The red light district, which a traveler is unable to avoid if wandering the city center, this district itself is the postwar rebuilding. A bunch of vomiting, disrespectful Westerners unleashed to do as much damage as they’d like in the name of understanding and rebuilding. Beautiful eastern European women on display like meat for the voracious appetites of the Westerners, often under the threat of violence or other retribution from their male handlers, a near-perfect parallel between the sex trade and Balkan politics. The smell of desperation, failure and human waste (interpret that last one however you will, either way it’s horrendously accurate) I feel sick to my stomach and sit down at a nearby café to sort my
thoughts. The character next to me generously passes me a joint, but I respectfully decline. I’m not ready to understand this town, and by proxy to understand the post-Yugoslavs who inhabit it. Not yet.

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The Quiet One

The tragic dissolution of Yugoslavia, which resulted in the deaths of over 300,000 people\textsuperscript{xiv}, a number of injuries and rapes on an equal scale, and the displacement of around four million civilians, started from the quest for independence and escalated through the state’s innate need for control.

The Serbs have become something of the world’s whipping boy for all Balkan atrocities, but such a view is wildly simplistic. War crimes have been committed by the Croats against the Bosnians and the Serbs, all documented and most of them ignored, forgetting entirely the atrocities of the 1940s. War crimes have been committed by the Bosnians against the Serbs and the Croats, with Bosnian paramilitaries near Srebrenica inciting their Serb attackers by massacring nearby towns and Bosnian politicians sacrificing their own people in the name of foreign press. The Kosovars are currently being brought to task for their

\textsuperscript{xiv} Lest we forget, soldiers are people too.
crimes, all as brutal and horrific as those of the Serbs. Kosovar Prime Minister Hashim Thaci is currently on trial for his high-level role in an organ smuggling ring\textsuperscript{18} that targeted ethnic Serbs.\textsuperscript{19} There are millions of victims, but every side is the villain.

It’s been anywhere from 15 to 25 years, and the world has fought, lawyered up, and had its collective therapy sessions. The number of war crimes, the number of war criminals, the victims, the perpetrators, those spaces of overlap, the numbers killed, maimed, raped, forcibly removed, the questions of definitions for any of these terms, these are unanswerable, uncountable. The instances are too numerous, the evidence too vast, millions of pages, the very concept and memory too painful, and at the same time too ambiguous, yet the attempt has been made, and made valiantly. The media and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have documented the atrocities of the breakup of Yugoslavia with unprecedented precision and attention. For the millions of victims of the wars that tore apart Yugoslavia, there has been an attempt at justice, or at least at recognition. Over 100 generals and leaders, mostly Serb but some Croat and even a few Bosnian, have been tried by the ICTY, many now rotting in The Hague.

Yet, as well-documented as the crimes of this region have been, there is one region, barely even Balkan, but still a remnant of the former Yugoslavia, where the atrocities of
the past century have been entirely overlooked, the repressions of ethnicities utterly ignored, a region of a crime so vast it’s victims may number in the millions, where a slow genocide threatens to erase the entire history of a proud, peaceful, centuries-old people after a single generation of Balkan “democracy,” yet has been willfully ignored. It is also a land where the word “independence” is rarely if ever uttered, yet the struggle for rights nearly equal to independence continues. What follows is a journal of a surprisingly sublime movement in an equally subtle region, and a study in the value of subtlety in a notoriously overt region, in a field where the squeaky wheel is known to get the grease.
Section 2: The Forgotten War Crime

A Movement to Save a Near-Extinguished Culture

The following section is a study of a movement, and in the interest of fairness, it includes the good with the bad. As with any collection of interviews among a diverse group working toward a common goal, from the Euromaidan protests of Ukraine to the Occupiers of Gezi Park in Turkey, Times Square in New York, and Tahrir Square in Egypt, there are opinions which are not shared among the group but which are expressed nonetheless by certain integral members. It is with this in mind that I present the whole of the following journal. Factual corrections are included in the footnotes, but the original assertions from the members, even the ones that read like divisive nationalist propaganda, remain in their original form.

At times, the author takes certain narrative liberties, most often in the form of the names or titles, in the interest of protecting sources.
Daughters of a Revolution (2007-2010)

It starts like any good revolution: A bunch of old gruff greybeard philosopher types sitting around a smoky dark cafe. Except it’s different this time. It had to be. In the long-occupied province of Vojvodina, officially part of the nation of Serbia, all those who might have been the greybeards of revolutions past were drafted a decade ago for a war they opposed by a government they barely recognized at the point of some very real Russian-made assault rifles. The ones who came home had left pieces of themselves out on the battlefield, or in the mass graves they were forced to fill. To them, revolution means death and the horror of war. The mention of the word sucks the color from their faces and the joy from their world. They hate the reality of Serbian rule, but the fighting spirit’s gone out of them.

Fortunately for Vojvodina, this is not their story. This revolution belongs to the daughters. The same smoky cafes, the same hushed whispers, but in the information age every man’s a philosopher, and in the feminist era, every woman’s as good as a man. In Vojvodina, in fact, they’re better.

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Izzy

Sitting on a bench in the middle of Novi Sad’s city center is the first time I meet Isabela. After greeting her in badly accented Serbocroatian and asking if the seat were free, I take a moment to get my bearings. My stare is alternating between the beautiful Catholic Church, impressive Austro-Hungarian facades, and rowdy protesters carrying banners declaring ”KOSOVO JE SRBIJA”\textsuperscript{xv} and chanting the same. She notices my interest and, assuming correctly that I’m an outsider, attempts to introduce the city in English.

”Vojvodina,” she begins, “that’s the upper province of Serbia, where you are now... we’ve never been independent. Occupied, colonized, never independent, but we have always been autonomous. As a buffer zone for the Austro-Hungarian Empire against the ‘barbarians’ to their south, we received special privileges for our service. When World War One erupted following the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian archduke by a Serb militant, the battle lines were drawn. Though it was a Serb who sparked the Hapsburgs’ reasonable retaliation and the entire war, the Empire’s alliance with Germany led, by the end of the war, to the view that they ‘backed the wrong horse,’ as you might say, and the penalties were severe.

\textsuperscript{xv} Translation: KOSOVO IS SERBIA.
Much of the Empire’s acreage was auctioned off to the winning team by the Treaty of Trianon."xvi

Even after Trianon, Vojvodina became part of Serbia, but we were still allowed to remain autonomous within. When the second Great War was declared, Axis invasion and atrocities in Yugoslavia led to murderous Serbian retaliation in its aftermath against many Vojvodinian ethnicities. When the rage had died down and the dust cleared, quite literally, Vojvodina was once more largely autonomous under Tito’s Yugoslavia. Yet, like the Kosovars, we have never in our history been fully independent. Like the American colonies before their Revolution, today, we are not even autonomous. We exist for Serbian exploitation, like the Americans for King George. Unlike Kosovo and still more like America, we are not one single ethnicity, we are not one religion, we are not even one language. We are, however, one people in one place, a nation without sovereignty and without rights to what is ours.

This is how it has been, this is how it is, but this is not how it has to be. We have the right to autonomy. We have the right to more than that. Vojvodina has the right to Independence. *Vojvodina nije Srbija! Vojvodina je*

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xvi Nationalism perspective check: The majority of Vojvodina-dwellers at the time of Trianon were in fact Serbs. It is not like a mostly Hungarian populated province was handed to Yugoslavia (with the exception of Subotica/Szabadka). This itself is similar to Arendt’s observation from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, already quoted in this text’s first footnote
Vojvodina!\textsuperscript{xvii} We must be free!” She declares this last bit with more passion that perhaps she should have, and the protesters took notice. Izzy, as I will later take to calling her, (a nickname she adopted quickly, loving this Westernization of her name), grabs my arm, apologizing, and leads me to a cafe several blocks away. The paths she walks me down contain enough “KOSOVO JE SRBIJA!” billboards with pictures of Kennedy, DeGaulle, Churchill, Stalin, and even Groucho Marx\textsuperscript{20}, to convince me not to protest and just ask questions later. She buys me a coffee to apologize for the inconvenience and after a bit more conversation we exchange e-mail addresses and part ways.

“Oh!” she yells as I’m walking away, ”and stay away from the center for the rest of today. You’re kind of noticeable...” She smiles sheepishly, and I get to know the back streets of Novi Sad as I look for the bus station.

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Natasha

In a different part of Vojvodina, far from the city lights of Novi Sad, in a smoky Serbian-state-owned cafe, I’m sitting with Natasha, a young chef who has been cooking throughout the Balkan region, from Greece to Macedonia to Montenegro, as far up as Romania. Living in Vojvodina,

\textsuperscript{xvii} Translation: "Vojvodina is not Srbija! Vojvodina is Vojvodina!"

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the only would-be nation in the Balkans not named for a specific ethnicity, all her life, growing up the daughter of a Hungarian father and a Croatian mother, and traveling throughout the homelands of all the Vojvodinians, she’s found her own special philosophy about the region and the people.

"It’s all the same," she tells me, her voice rising to compete with Ella Fitzgerald’s *Fever* in the background. "The faces, the attitudes, even the food. We’re all the same but for our hats. The Romanians, Bosnians, Croats, Serbs, Albanians, Hungarians. We all have the same customs, the same traditions. We’ve all been the aggressor; we’ve all been the victim. We’re all the same but for our hats. The difference in Vojvodina is that, where the wrong hat is enough elsewhere to enslave and slaughter, we put this shallowest of distinctions behind us. We live here as neighbors, as friends, as brothers and sisters, as husbands and wives like my own parents. As such, we’ve never seen much reason to act as the aggressor, not when we were left to live our lives as we saw fit, autonomously and free. And we remain the only former Yugoslav people who can make such a claim. Through peace, we have earned our place in the world, and with peace as our heritage, we deserve our chance to escape the violent legacy of the Serbian nation to whom we were donated at the point of a sword a century ago by misguided and vengeful idealists. A century as a Serbian colony is too long in this post-
colonial era. Not all of us seek independence, but it is long past time for autonomy to be ours.”

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Nadja

Sitting with Nadja, a young Vojvodinian student, in a darkened underground bar discussing the politics of religion in Serbia, she tells me a little about her family’s history in the region.

”My family long back was Serbian, the proud, strongly Slavic type.” Nadja’s black hair and darkly accented features are in stark contrast with this description. They are a beautiful call-back to the horrific Primae Noctis, or First Night, tradition of the conquering Turks. Turkish rulers and soldiers claimed first right to brides on their wedding night in the more rebellious territories to break the peoples’ spirit. If Nadja’s ancestors had moved simply to escape Turkish atrocities, it would have been bad enough, but the truth is far worse.

”My family moved long ago to Vojvodina to reap the rewards of service to the Austro-Hungarian crown, certainly. Vojvodina, even before my ancestors moved here, was a symbol of hope and opportunity,” she tells me. ”But the true cause of that journey was to escape the ostracization and threats that followed carrying to term 38
the product of the Turks’ weaponized rape, the true cuckolding of Serb society.”

They could have gone anywhere to escape, to Bosnia, or Dalmatia where such features would not be so strange, but in Vojvodina they could own land, they could live free. Vojvodina, in an era before the concept of freedom and independence led revolutions an ocean away, was a shining beacon of freedom at the peak of the Balkans.

The exalted, though often unattained, ideals of The United States, realized thousands of miles away and over a century earlier. An escape from Turkish oppression, a chance for a real future, a dream maintained, sustained for centuries even as a colony, now crushed by Western treaties and Balkan petty politics.

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“Exploitation”

With all this volatile talk of Serbian exploitation, I’m cautious to jump to conclusions without sufficient evidence. Sitting at lunch with a Vojvodinian family, the most gracious hosts I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, I hear the word again. “Exploitation. So I ask my hosts what they mean.

Abruptly, my hostess, Vesna, the matriarch of this amazing tribe, stands and walks to the doorway. While
putting on her coat, and without finishing the fantastic meal she spent hours preparing, she summons me. “Come. We will walk.” Though confused and concerned that I far overstepped the line of decency, I don’t argue.

The winter chill makes the silence of the ten-minute walk feel reasonable, not awkward.

As we arrive at our destination, the bank of a thin blue-grey river, Vesna points to the water. “This,” she says in her fluent but strongly accented English, “is crowning achievement of Serbian exploitation. This is the Tisa. In summer, if you are still here, I will take you up-river, where the water is still clear, still shines in the sun. This is grey Tisa. Industry Tisa. I show you why.”

As we walk along the riverbank, I notice no birds or wildlife of any kind. I assume it’s the winter that drove them away, until we arrive at an intersection of two rivers and Vesna stops walking. I look up and am impressed by the enormous steel device; a dam which I later find out was designed by protégés of Monsieur Eiffel himself. I look over at Vesna and she shakes her head “no” and points down. What I see horrifies me. Vesna sees the look on my face, smiles grimly and says “exactly.”

The intersection is black and slow, with little oil sheens here and there. I worry what might happen if one of the men fishing in the river were to drop his cigarette into the water. Then it dawns on me that what should worry me more is that there are men fishing in this filth.
“They’re really going to eat that?” I ask her.

“We’re very poor here. We have the most agriculturally rich land in all of former Yugoslavia, but Serbia takes the money from it and uses it to support ‘Serbian Interests’.” She says these last words menacingly, and I understand that what is in “Serbian interests” is not in the interest of anyone else in the region. “So yes, they will bring that to their families, those fish that are already rotting before they are even dead, and they will be lunch.”

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Nevena

“I used to walk along that bridge with my grandfather every weekend,” says Nevena sadly, pointing to three cement monstrosities protruding from the Danube.

“He died when I was eight. The Americans bombed it when I was nine. The explosion blew out every window in my grandmother’s apartment. It’s hard to blame America. There was a genocide to end, a dictator to depose, and Serbs were the root of all this evil. This was before the age that diaspora states and stateless enemies could be understood by a Western public, therefore the Serbs and Serbia had to be viewed as one entity. According to all official maps, Novi Sad is Serbia’s second-largest city and a perfect target for the infrastructure destruction that has
become American military strategy. It is widely recognized that the Novi Sad bombings are Milosevic’s fault. By using his soccer hooligan Serb riot squads to oust Vojvodina’s elected leadership and replace them with his own puppets, he made Vojvodina implicit in the atrocities committed by the decaying corpse of Tito’s Yugoslavia. After the attacks on UN soldiers and protectorates in the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia and Kosovo, he had to be stopped. He should have been stopped sooner, but better late than never. I wish there’d been another way to end it, but I can’t blame America. You’re the world’s police. The only superpower, it was your responsibility. I just wish you could have left my bridge...”

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Mostar, Bosnia

As generalized in the preceding chapter, under the eternal rule of Tito, Yugoslavia was a nation not of Serbs or Croats or Bosnians or Kosovars but of Yugoslavs. A person from Belgrade could be the closest of friends with a person from Sarajevo. A girl from one side of the bridge in Mostar, near the Ottoman-era mosque, could marry a boy from the other side by the Orthodox Church without

\[ \text{xviii} \] A whitewashed generalization, to be sure, but it was barely more divided than the United States of America or Britain today.

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scandal or comment. Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia were more geographic divisions than ethnic. After the death of Tito and the decline of the Yugoslav economy, however, local and national leaders saw ethnic divisions that had not existed for generations as the path to political power. Four years from that easy peace, the bridge that connected the two sides was destroyed by Croatian mortars as each side savagely sought the other’s extermination.

“When they destroyed our bridge, I was thrilled,” said Samir, a Bosnian Muslim who I’d come to Mostar to speak with. “I knew that the world would begin to pay attention. They pay attention to injured animals, to damaged cultural or historical sites, not to people.” He was right. The USA and its NATO allies intervened mere months after the bridge fell. Intervention, at the minimal rate that the international community engaged, however, was little more than lip service. The saving grace that the Bosnians saw from the USA and NATO did not stop the ethnic cleansing, not for over two years.

My interview with Samir led us over a series of breathtaking ancient bridges to a chokingly smoke-filled café by the bridge, rebuilt in 2004 by a UNESCO-led coalition for a price tag of over $15 million. As the shattered glass and shrapnel make the ground glitter in the sun among buildings both holy and holey, it's easy to imagine, from the angle of impact, the tanks and riflemen on the mountain peaks surrounding the city. One tries to
erase the image from one’s mind as one passes graveyard after graveyard filled with stones marked "1993". It's a chilling reminder of Balkan pride and Balkan wrath, and it's not simply isolated to the war zones of Bosnia. This is the world that these women were born in or grew up in or tried to start a family in. And it's this memory that turns every mention of the word "Independence" into a hushed whisper. But reminders are everywhere. Hate-speech graffiti is beginning to plaster the walls of Vojvodina’s cities. Whispers of atrocities past rekindle the flames of ethnic hatred more and more often. From small acts of targeted violence against the non-Serb ethnicities to full-on movements and events lobbying for the expulsion of the Hungarians, en masse. If the nationalist fights in the streets weren’t enough to convince an observer of the reality, the hand grenade thrown through the window of the home of the leader of the League of Vojvodina Hungarians should be. It is not just nationalist alarmism bringing back the terrifying memories of ethnic cleansing. It’s real.

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Vesna in Winter

Walking along the riverbank with Vesna a few months later, as winter and spring battle it out for supremacy, I
suddenly get bold enough to ask the question that’s been bothering me for the past three months. I certainly could have chosen a more tactful way to do it, but hindsight is 20-20. I callously ask her why independence seems like a good idea. ”The rest of the post-Yugoslav states are founded on bloodshed, overrun with corruption, and deeply impoverished. I know Serbia is bad. In fact, it may be the worst of all of them. But why do you think Vojvodina would do any better?”

Vesna seems to have put a lot of thought into her response, a theory she seems to have been dwelling on for years.

”It took Moshe and the Israelites forty years of wandering through the desert to complete the journey from bondage to the holy land. By the time they arrived, Moshe had died, like so many of his peers, before ever setting foot in Israel. It was an entirely new generation that settled in Jerusalem than that which fled Egypt.

”It took Black Americans forty years from the assassination of Martin Luther King to the election of Barack Obama. The journey from slavery to the American Civil War, and from the War to the Civil Rights Movement, was just the beginning. The long march from King to Obama saw an entirely new generation of African-Americans find their way to something like equality.

“More than three decades have now passed since the death of Tito, the only man capable of holding together
Yugoslavia, and the only figure in history to maintain a successful and happy communist state. Since his death, we have seen countless atrocities, endless economic strife, and failure after failure in attempts to become Democratic, free market and pluralistic. A people who have been enslaved will want, out of vengeance or out of habit, to be slave owners. The slave generation cannot rule over a free society. We have wandered through the desert for thirty years now, but the time for a successful post-Yugoslav democracy is fast approaching, with the first post-communist generation coming of age and coming to power. If Moshe was any guide, we come now to Vojvodina’s, and the rest of Yugoslavia’s, moment of truth.”

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**Belgrade**

From where I sit, Belgrade seems a city without an identity. Its quaint but beautiful train station harkens back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, despite Belgrade having been just outside the empire’s reach. On most sides, this piece of art is flanked by unwashed grey throwbacks to Stalinism, whose only markings are the deeply contradictory Vegas lights and signs, often in both Cyrillic and Latin letters, for the many cheap casinos within. If you
stare straight out from the entrance of the train station, you’ll see a single tall glass building standing awkwardly, lonely, glinting in the sun, which would feel a great deal more comfortable in New York or Los Angeles with its similarly tall and shiny family.

Heading further away from the excesses of this area, we find the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. We cross the bridges over the Danube, works of aesthetic and architectural starvation that only a communist could love. The first vision that greets us is like walking into a documentary on the Shantytowns of the American ‘30s. A village of corrugated cardboard and rusted sheet metal held together with packing tape. The most blatant display of institutionalized racism west of Apartheid South Africa, this area, two solid city blocks of cramped makeshift houses, is one of the countless Gypsy ghettos, home to thousands of members of Belgrade’s only significant racial minority, the Roma.

Another four blocks down the road, passing a few stagnating building projects and several signs with those same foreign dignitaries still proclaiming that “Kosovo is Serbia”, we come to the most modern structure in the entire city, the Belgrade Arena. A giant concrete and glass structure with beautiful pieces of modern art and bridges out of medieval times represents all that Serbia and

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xix Not ethnic, racial
Belgrade could become. That it faces on one side the most poorly-designed piece of roadwork I’ve ever witnessed and on the other side a financial district made up primarily of foreign banks is sad, ironic, and ultimately telling of the identity crisis facing this city.

I mention this thought to Nevena as we wait for a bus in the pickpocket-rich area next to the beautiful train station. It seems I’m not the first to make such an observation.

“Belgrade has refused to choose a style, an era, an industry, an ethos, nor even something as simple and vital as an alphabet. This is reflective of Serbia’s inability, as a whole, to choose an identity. There is a large contingent of the Serb political machine who feels that alliance with Russia is the best course. The Orthodox Christians have long felt the ties of faith to the East. Since the NATO bombings, this sentiment has grown stronger. There is a similarly large sect pushing for E.U. ascension. Most of this pressure comes from Vojvodina and, to a lesser extent, the progressive groups in urban centers like Belgrade. And then there are the powerful Serb nationalists who simply want to be Serbia, an identity that to them often implies aggression toward their neighbors in the desire to reclaim all parts of the ancient “Greater Serbia”, and who wish for the rest of the world to leave them alone.

No choice has been made, no direction can be taken. Serbia is left without a stable economy, without a stable
political structure, and without any certainty in their future. The best that can be hoped for in their case is stagnation. If Serbia went East and allied with Russia, progress could be made, but the only way this would be possible is without Vojvodina. Serbia shares the values of the East that caused Josef Stalin to be voted the nation’s second-greatest historical figure by the Russian people. Vojvodina’s history of freedom and ethnic tolerance, as well as our multicultural heritage, give us an ethnic and ideological predisposition towards liberalism and the West.

We are two very different countries with two very different agendas heading in two very different directions. From an economic standpoint, Serbia could benefit by letting us go, each of us finally being allowed to look toward our individual future. I just don’t think pride will let them see it that way...”

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Tatjana

These women are truly remarkable and multifaceted. Every time I think I’ve got them figured out, there’s a new surprise. One steady trait I’ve seen, though, is their forward-thinking nature. They do not dwell on historical injustices like so much of Europe. Tatjana’s grandmother,
she tells me, spent time in a Serb concentration camp after World War Two. After the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, they did not cease “working” – they simply changed the inhabitants. The oppressors became the oppressed, or at least the people of their ethnicities did, regardless of their age or connection to the atrocities committed. She was 13 years old, but her father, dead since before the war, had been German, and that was enough to target her for Serb vengeance. “Everyone knows that two wrongs do not make a right. It’s among the first lessons of childhood. But governments never learn. Hate begets hate. Violence begets violence. The Vojvodinian Germans and Hungarians were not the soldiers of their long-departed homelands. In fact, most of the victims of the Nazis in this region were not Serb but Hungarian. But the politics of their bloodlines made them victims of both sides. So much so that a 13-year-old farmgirl was shipped, along with her 6-and-15-year-old brothers, to the camps and kept there. The only reason they were released was their mother’s marriage, for the sake of survival more than love, to one of their Serbian guards.”

This was the first, and, as it happened, the last, I’d heard of this. I’d had several conversations already with Tatjana’s grandmother, translated by any of her numerous grandchildren, but she’d never touched on this subject. She would talk about the unfairness of the treaty of Trianon breaking up the Austro-Hungarian Empire when
Germany received a simple slap on the wrist. She’d elaborate and grow furious when she pointed out that it was a Serb terrorist who started World War I in the first place by assassinating the Hapsburg Archduke. And perhaps all this was simply hiding the reality that was too hard to bear, having her childhood stolen away in an act of ethnic vengeance, but she never went past Trianon in her complaints. She’d rather focus on the cause of all the problems, and on the future. “Those who fail to learn from history,” Tatjana translates, “are doomed to repeat it. Those who fail to move on from history are doomed to stagnation and bitterness. The tragedy of the Balkans is the stubborn clinging to a misunderstood and mistranslated history. A thousand-some years of bloodshed, increasing in intensity over the last century. War after war after war fought by brothers against brothers in the name of uncommitted historical wrongs. The only way to break the cycle, and the only way to live, is to think not of the past but of the future.”

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Marija

Spring is a strange time in Vojvodina. Perhaps the most beautiful physical scenery I’ve ever seen, especially lovely after the depressing grey of a Balkan winter, it’s
actually the religious terrain that’s on my mind right now. Though Eastern Orthodox is the Serbian state religion, it is only a legal matter here. With no actual dominant faith in the region, the Catholics and the Orthodox both maintain their traditions and their celebrations, and they do so separately, equally, and surprisingly peacefully. After traveling through the region and seeing the charred remains of the churches of conquered peoples in Kosovo and Bosnia, the perversions of religious symbols and art in conquered regions of Hungary, or the church made by the Turks out of the skulls of Serb defenders in southern Serbia, the idea of a Balkan region with competing but cooperative religious communities is almost beyond my capacity to understand. Yet Vojvodina is at peace with this multicultural heritage.

I met Marija first at her city’s Catholic church, at their Easter celebration. Her mother was very interested in introducing her to “the American” to help expand her horizons. So when I saw the young lady again at an Orthodox Easter dinner, I couldn’t help but smile. It simply epitomized what I love about this place. I didn’t even have to ask, but Marija approached and began to explain. “I’m here with my dad. He’s a Serb and my mom’s a Hungarian, but they both agreed that the Orthodox Church was more beautiful and more appropriate for their wedding. When they got married in the Orthodox Church, my mom was made to sign a piece
of paper promising that their children would be raised Orthodox. I guess she’s been here long enough to learn the art of Serbian spite- Inat, because after I was born, she pointed out to the priest who married them that the contract never said ‘exclusively’ Orthodox.”

“Is it hard to deal with two different religions, two different upbringings?” I ask.

“Are you kidding? I get two Christmases, two New Years, two Easters, and all the other holidays in between. Only in Vojvodina could my mom and dad keep their separate religions. Down in Serbia, my mother would have had to forget her heritage. Up in Hungary, my father would have had to forget his. Only here could I be blessed with both.”

In a region defined by two decades of wars based on little more than religion and Inat, (a term without an English equivalent other than stubborn spite, illustrated by acts like Marija’s mother’s, or the Serb civilians who wore targets on their shirts during the NATO bombings), Vojvodina’s cooperative and neighborly religious atmosphere is a real breath of fresh air, a promise of unity and future peace.

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These Women

Ours is a society that teaches women to hate themselves. I’m not talking about The United States, or even Western society. Women worldwide are taught that they are too fat or too thin or too tall or too short, and they come to believe it as truth. Diet pills and weight loss supplements are a multi-billion dollar industry. As nearby as Croatia, the fashion industry has popularized sunglasses so large they obscure half of a woman’s face, and they are worn even on grey days. The message? Hide yourself.

Vojvodina is a refreshing break from this cycle of self-loathing. Life is harder here than anywhere else I’ve been; there’s running water as little as four and as much as 18 hours a day when I arrive, unemployment is at 68% in some villages, and by the time I leave, public electricity is a thing of the past, with street lights a mere functionless monument to a better time. Neighbors watch neighbors freeze to death and try to help but would themselves suffer the same fate were they to give any more. Yet the women wear real smiles, the kind I never saw in Krakow or Zagreb or even Rome. The laughter, too, is more honest, not forced. Obesity is nearly nonexistent. The most beautiful among them never put on blush or lipstick. The women here do not have easy lives, but they love
themselves, they live lives of productivity and feel that they matter, and it makes all the difference.

It is not a failing in the men, but a difference in worldview and life experience that makes the women receptive to change in a way Vojvodina’s men have yet to consider. These women want a change, but they don’t expect their men to save them. They understand the desire to find stability in the status quo and know that when their husbands and brothers cling to their subsistence-wage jobs that it is not out of stubbornness or ignorance but out of the desperate struggle for familial survival. Over 52% of Vojvodina is unemployed, and the number is rising at an alarming rate.

“It’s starting to feel like the 90s all over again,” says Vesna. We’ve all seen the pictures of Zimbabwe’s citizens hauling wheelbarrows of cash to pay for bread. History teachers love to tell the stories of the pre-WWII German inflation that had the people burning paper money for kindling. But while they get better publicity (and make much better photos), these examples pale in comparison to the inflation seen in Yugoslavia’s early 1990s. In its worst four-month period, there was an inflation of 5 quadrillion (5,000,000,000,000,000) percent. Not knowing this myself, it was quite a surprise when, in my first meeting with Nevena, she made a gift of a decades-old 100,000 Dinar bill. Later, when I talked with Vesna about “the bad times,” it all started to make more sense.
“We learned to make our own bread. I made chocolate out of kakao and dried milk. We planted seeds to grow our own potatoes, onions, everything. Stores were always out of necessities. We never thought we’d have to, it was skills we’d never needed before, but we got paid, millions of Dinar, on Friday and spent our paycheck that day because on Saturday we would not be able to buy even matches. We pretended it was normal, and we tried to stay normal in our heads, but it was not normal. And it’s scary now. Because half the stores are fully stocked and nobody’s buying, and they’re starting to close. And the other half have nothing but bare shelves. Low demand, lower supply. And the Treasury has started to print more money again. Every time I go to the bank, I am given new, fresh, crisp bills. I’ve seen this happen before. The signs are there. What do you call that when you’ve seen this before? Deja vu? Yes. Deja vu…”

Vesna’s not alone. Everyone I speak to in the small towns of Vojvodina is feeling the same hints of deja vu. The same words are repeated over and over. “It feels like the 90s all over again…” “It’s the same as the Milosevic days…” The men of Vojvodina are fighting a losing battle, struggling to stay afloat in a sea of recession, oppression, and corruption. The women of Vojvodina love the men of their tribe, and respect the struggle, but they are not willing to be the damsels in distress waiting for their knights in shining armor to save them. They don’t expect
the West to save them, though they welcome any support and assistance with gratitude and open arms. They don’t rely on God to save them, though they pray for a blessing and a miracle to see them through. They want a change and they believe in and love themselves, and they strive, as Gandhi suggested, to be the change they seek. Vojvodina is an oasis in a desert of feminine self-loathing, an inspiration in an increasingly desolate world.

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Living the Dream

The economic situation here is getting worse every day. In my short time, food prices have spiked in both dollar value and dinar cost, gas stations have drained to empty, stores have stopped selling basic depression-era necessities like tobacco. It’s shocking to watch, but I know I’m the lucky one here. I have an escape hatch. I can watch, I can comment, I can observe, I can live it and try to help the people of Vojvodina change their future, but if I need, or even want, I can hop on a train or a bus and I can leave this country, even this continent, back to the US of A, the land of riches and credit and milk and honey. But for the people here, this is the reality they have no choice but to deal with. I already knew they had the skills to survive in
it, albeit harshly. What I didn’t expect was their willingness to teach those skills to me.

What little boy in America doesn’t want to be Han Solo when he grows up? Hell, I still do. And the Black Marketeers of Vojvodina were more than happy to give me a little taste of the life. The reality of life as a smuggler, no matter the commentary by conventional authorities, is at least as cool as the fantasy, and often weirder. One morning, three hours after I closed my eyes, Tamara and Nenad shook me from my sleep and motioned me to the oversized red Yugoxx waiting outside. At 4 in the morning, with no street lights on the rutted Serbian roads, 90 kilometers per hour (60mph) seems much faster. The open road, long the ultimate symbol of freedom, is in this alternate reality an obstacle to be overcome. The smugglers with whom I am traveling here respect the road as the only path to survival for their community, yet are fully cognizant of its hazards and treachery, the traps and enemies waiting for them.

When we reach the Hungarian border, I come to understand more fully why my hosts frisked me before I entered the car. “It’s not like the 90s, yet,” Tamara tells me as the border patrols probe the car, searching the tires, glove compartment, even our pockets. “This is mostly

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xx A common and adorable sight on Serbian roads, the Yugo was the engineering marvel of Yugoslavia: a downgraded Fiat 127 intended as an affordable mode of transit for all. Voted Car Talk’s worst car of the millennium, it’s the butt of hundreds of international jokes, but it’s cheap and easily repaired, a true car of the people.
symbolic. We’re just small fish. It makes no true economic or legal difference to Serbia or Hungary if we’re caught. We pay the stores in Hungary the normal E.U. price for these goods, and we bring them back to our town to make sure our friends and family can get the necessities of life without paying the embargoes and taxes imposed on the citizens of Serbia. Even with the markup we give for gas and travel and risk, our prices are still under 1/3 the price of anything you could find in Serbia. This is just the beginning. If these economic policies continue, we’ll have people like Atila back on the road.” At the mention of the name, Nenad smiles.

I’d heard his story straight from the horse’s mouth (though I required some translation to fully understand it). In his late 50s now and formally banned from Hungary, he’s outrun the authorities in three countries, trekked from the west of Yugoslavia to Istanbul and back in three days for a quick but well-timed currency exchange, and eluded Hungarian police helicopters by turning off his headlights and only using his parking brake so the brake lights never turned on. For their public service in the face of arbitrarily imposed privation bordering on starvation, the smugglers are heroes to the people of Vojvodina. For his skill, luck, and sheer ballsiness, Atila is the hero of the smugglers.

“Just small fish”... the statement made more sense when we arrived at our destination. With images of sleazy cantinas and gypsy caravans and backroom deals in my
mind, the Wal-Mart--esque warehouse that was our endpoint shattered everything I’d imagined about smugglers. Every ten days, the three grocery carts of meat, cheese, oil, condiments, medication, dog food, and a few children’s toys, paid for in cash, not barter, are the only normalizing force between the people in Tamara’s community and the harsh repeat of the 1990s waiting for them around the corner. These folks are not Han Solo. They’re not Robin Hood. They are not even heroes. They are good neighbors, good parents, good friends, normal people pushed by ridiculous politics to ethically violate unfair and arbitrary barriers to their community’s survival.

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Ana

“You can’t want the past until you’ve lost the past”
~Anthropologist Joshua Reno

Atop the white towers of the castle Fantast, on a clear blue day like this you can see for miles in every direction. To the south, the mountain of Fruska Gora, to the north, the River Tisa, and in between nothing but lush green fields. The cotton-candy clouds above us complete the idyllic perfection of the scene, and intensify the
contradictory feeling of the conversation in which I’m currently engaged.

“This is why I love this place,” I say to Ana, the local equestrian who was so kind as to show me around the castle. “This beautiful scenery without the scars of war and hate that are so unavoidable in the rest of this area.”

Ana raises an eyebrow as if surprised by my naiveté.

“You want to see a war scar? You’re looking at one. Not from the 90s. This one is much, much older. Look at these fields. What’s missing?”

I frown in confusion, unable to figure out what she’s getting at. The fields are filled with beautiful flowering trees of peach and apple and cherry, with yellow sunflowers and golden wheat, with miles of indecipherable green that could be spinach or lettuce or cabbage or just plain grass. There are hawks circling above, which means that there are rabbits or mice below. I just can’t think of what might be missing.

“Come on. Outside the box, or whatever it is you all say. Think beyond the pretty. What’s not there, in those fields, that should be? Why are these fields here, cultivated like this, in the first place? What’s gone now?”

“Workers?” I venture.

“That’s a cold word for it. That’s a word the Communists would have used. People. People are what’s missing. The same Communists that came in to this castle, looted its furniture and artwork and stones and lit it
ablaze, those same forces left another invisible scar. There used to be farms here. Families used to live here and cultivate the land, respecting it and surviving off of it. My family owned one of these farms, until the Communists took it all away in 1946. They wanted to centralize the nation of Yugoslavia, and they feared the countryside, because people out here were harder to control and might incite a revolution. Our house, our land, our horses, everything, they took our entire community away and moved us to the cities. We learned to live with it, and we waited, through two generations, for the Communists to leave and for the return of our rightful property.

“It never happened. In Croatia, property is beginning to be returned or refunded. In Slovenia, that happened almost as soon as independence. Serbia is the only functioning post-Yugoslav nation without a functioning property restitution policy. When Milosevic came to power, the state-owned assets were divvied up among his friends. Now my family’s farm is owned by a major farming conglomerate, our house and barns were destroyed to make room for more fields, and the closest I get to ever going home is raising horses at the castle that used to be in our backyard. I have other friends whose families owned factories and restaurants in the pre-war days. Today, their rightful family possessions are property of the Mafija.
“My family has always been proud of our Serb heritage, but we no longer wave the flag, we no longer sing the anthem. When proud Serbs want to break away from Serbia, you know something is wrong. But there’s just no way to make it right. None of us expect the return. We cope and we move on, but we do not forget, and we do not forgive. I don’t dream that my family’s farm will be mine someday. There is nothing left of it. But it boils my blood that it is now legally owned by thieves and there is nothing I can do about it.”

It’s a story I hear over and over again as the people of Vojvodina show me around their ancestral homeland. They’ll roll down the window of the Yugo in which we’re inevitably driving, point through the rain or snow at a landmark of great personal significance, and say sadly “that used to be my family’s, before the Communists.” That farm, that house, that store, that factory. It belonged to my grandfather… that’s where my grandmother used to… that was my uncle’s…

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Ti Si Lala

“Ha! Ti si Lala! Americki Lala!”

Atila shouted the words with unexpected joy. I had no idea what I’d done to bring this on. I’d been reclining in
his red easy chair, enjoying his homegrown pecans, sipping his home-brewed rakija, and joking back and forth with him and Nadja in broken Serbian. Out of nowhere, as far as I knew, he’d just called me a tulipxxi, and my masculinity was not being called into question but dismissed outright. Usually in Serbia, bringing “Americki” and anything vaguely homosexual into the same sentence implies that hooligans are mere moments from ruining your day. As I’ve never been more respectfully terrified of a human being than of the mighty Atila, this was an unforeseen and undesired twist. Seeing my confusion and defensiveness, Nadja came to my aid.

“Lala is Vojvodinian man,” she explained, “Sosa is woman. Your sense of humor, it has shown in your way of thinking that you are much more gregarious, have learned to relax in our way. You have come to love our food, as your belly shows.” I should have thanked them both from the bottom of my heart, but still confused, and perhaps a mite hurt at the belly comment, I remained stuck on verbiage. “Tulip?” I asked. Unfazed by my ignorance and lack of manners, Nadja explained, “For bravery in battle, the soldiers of the borderlands were called to Vienna to receive medals. Maria Teresa went through the rest of the regions, from Transylvania to Bohemia, before getting to Vojvodina. By the time she reaches our province of Banat,

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xxi Ti si Lala = you are a Tulip, at least to my foreign vocabulary
she ran out of medals. Instead of ending the ceremony, she tucked a tulip, an incredibly expensive flower at that time, imported from Holland, into the lapel of each Banat warrior. The tulip, or Lala, became our symbol. And you, in your time here, have become Lala. Even Atila says so.” She glanced to Atila, who was pointing to the hat hung on the wall behind him, a traditional crumpled Vojvodinian bowler with what I now saw was a tulip on the front. “Ti!” he repeated.

If we hadn’t been many cups of Atila’s homebrewed rakija in to the night, it would have brought tears to my eyes. I wasn’t just their pet American anymore. I’d been welcomed in to the tribe. Vesna brought out a tray of sausage from the back room, picked up a glass of wine from Vojvodina’s only hill, and joined the conversation. “We accept those who accept us,” said Vesna simply, “but you have not just accepted us. You’ve become one of us. We will be sad to see you go, if and when the time comes.”

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The Farmers

Even after the Communist crimes, Vojvodina today is still a largely agrarian province. Ana introduced me to one of the “lucky” families, whose farm had not been taken by the revolution. A city boy like myself has no place on a
farm, but they were kind enough to not only show me around, but to give me several days to experience farm life.

Stojan, the patriarch, gives me the basics. “Vojvodina produces 70% of Serbia’s agriculture, of fruit, dairy and meat,” He tells me as he shows off his beautiful fields. “We are the backbone of Serbia, but for our services we receive no reward.”

He brings me to the barn where the cows are kept and introduces me to his wife who’d been in there working. I’ve never considered using the word “bitterly” to describe feeding, but there she was, bitterly feeding her cows. Stojan tried to be comforting, in Serbian, and seemed to have brought her back to civility before introducing me.

“I am sorry,” was the first thing she said. “I did not know we had visitor. Please excuse my mood.” She sighs “we are not having good year. Last year, Serbian Government nationalized farms like ours. We are not allowed to sell produce except to the state. They pay us 21 Dinar ($0.28) per liter, and the government then resells it for 60 Dinar ($0.88)! At that price, farmers can’t afford to feed animals, especially because feed price is also set by Serbia. In the last year, 60 thousand dairy cows are slaughtered. All our friends have chosen to slaughter their cows because they cannot afford to be dairy farmers any more. I have held out hope, but today I am starting to think that we have no choice. “This new Serbian law does
not affect Serbia, as less than 30% of farming is done below the Danube. Serbia does not allow for sustainable economy in Vojvodina, only thinking about how to collect money and goods.”

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“It is not possible to live...”

The international community has placed on the Serbian people the bulk of the blame for the atrocities of the 1990s, rubbing the Serbs’ noses in their mess, forcing acceptance of guilt without recognizing wrongs committed against the Serbs, who lick their wounds and wait for their chance at a return to greatness. In Bosnia, those wounds are still unhealed, unscabbed even, festering. The Croats, in 1991, declared their independence from the former Yugoslavia, many dressed in their Nazi uniforms. Today, they build monuments declaring themselves the “victims of fascism,” despite, among other things, their work in Mostar. Croatia’s wounds are misrecognized and misrepresented, its crimes wholly unacknowledged. The revisionist history of this emerging “Paris of the Balkans” is an interesting case study in the different psychologies ingrained in Trans-Atlantic versus Slavic cultures.
Croatia suffered, without a doubt, in the 1990s. The Croatian city of Vukovar witnessed the worst kind of war, a city seemingly beyond redemption, executed in the bloodiest gangland massacre conceivable. The attention to detail, the commitment to destruction exhibited by the Serbian army in this civil war was incomprehensible and heartbreaking.

When I visited Auschwitz years earlier, the site of the execution of distant members of my own family, I had wanted to feel pain, loss, something. I had wanted to feel holiness, redemption, or evil, hatred. But there was nothing at all. A place devoid of holiness, devoid of evil, devoid of any emotion whatsoever. Salted earth for the supernatural. I felt literally nothing. So it was that I left Auschwitz without a heavy heart and without any resolution on a deeper human connection after one of history’s greatest tragedies. Vukovar is similarly dead, but in a much more current and physical way.

The city lies on the border of Croatia and Serbia, at the confluence of the Vuka River and the Danube. As Croatia’s largest major river port and mixed community of Croats and Serbs, the city has significant political, economic and symbolic importance to both sides. As such, during the wholly horrific wars of the 1990s, this most tragic of cities was a point of much contention.

During the 87-day siege, 2,000 civilians did their best to defend their families and neighbors from 36,000
invading Serb soldiers. Serb forces captured the hospital, promising to evacuate the non-military personnel. This never occurred. Instead, over 300 people were executed and buried in secret. The city suffered the worst devastation in Europe since World War Two. Of course, according to many witnesses, the Serbs were not alone in committing atrocities against civilians in this battle, and many, such as the journal *Defense & Foreign Affairs* have regularly leveled the charge against Croatia that preceding the Serb invasion similar or greater atrocities were being committed against Serbs by Croat paramilitaries. However, the established story does place the crux on Serbia, and this story deserves its telling here.

Vukovar’s water tower stands as a true testament to the brutality of the war, and to the Serbian army’s commitment to the utter destruction of the city. The studied destruction is evident in so many ways. If they’d done any more damage, or in different spots, the tower would have fallen, but that was not the point. This was a message and a reminder. Spraypainted at the tower’s base, the intent was verbalized: “God Forgives. Serbs Don’t.” And, as the Serbs had intended, the Croatian government has left the tower intact, though in its destroyed form, as a reminder of the pain inflicted upon its residents.

While the Croatian flag beyond the trees on the edge of town may serve as reassurance to some residents, the flag is there because this is the official borderline with the
Serbia. It’s hard to imagine the emotions it must evoke, being able to look across the river to see Serbia, the perpetrator of this war crime. Vukovar’s tragedy remains today as a symbol for Croatia of both the evils of their Serb brethren and the importance of independence.

The destruction was so complete that the city of Hiroshima, Japan, has set up an art gallery in the destroyed former hospital voicing solidarity with the city and drawing parallels from the JNA destruction to the American Atomic Bomb. And it was upon exiting this gallery that I was approached by a beggar walking down this street. As I was finding change for him, he told me in a mix of English and Croatian the story of his wife, who was raped, kidnapped, and killed by the Serb forces. His story ended with the words “It is not possible to live…”

“Three month, we held here. Hostages in our own town,” said the beggar. “5 Kuna, please. I have no home. The Serbs, they come, they destroy my home,” he gets on his knees and reenacts the scene, him begging, the Serb aiming a rifle at his head. “They take my wife,” he mimes handcuffs, a helicopter. “My beautiful wife. They take her away. I never see her again…” his wild grey hair, greasy from days, more like months, without a shower, waves like a pendulum as he shakes his head in sadness. “It is not possible to live.” 5 Kuna is barely a dollar, and all I’ve got is 10, so that’s what I give. “Zao mi je, my friend.” In his own language, nor in mine, there’s no way to tell him how
truly sorry I am. There is no way to feel the kind of pain he feels. That he relives that scene every time he begs, almost 20 years later, I cannot comprehend how he keeps going.

From the depths of a cafe, deep within the bowels of a destroyed apartment complex, came a familiar tune. It took a moment to place it as a minor-key version of a Beatles classic. As I got closer, I heard the lyrics, Croatian for “Let It Be,” sung mournfully by the residents, drinking away their sorrows and their losses. A haunting, unforgettable tune. Inside, I sit down at the bar up front, next to a tipsy young man. “Twenty million dollars they spend to repair the Old Bridge of Mostar, much by the Croatian government, my government,” he says without introduction. “Yet they spend nothing to repair our homes, our city. They memorialize our city, making us a grave and a monument to the terrible Serbs while we, thousands of Croatian citizens, still live here, countless homeless, staring at the wreckage instead of allowing us to live.” He finishes his drink. “The pain sustains us, the drink sustains us, but we are dead. Inside, and to the world.” He has not looked at me once during his monologue, and I don’t know if he’s practicing a speech, talking to himself, or actually trying to explain the city to me.

Vukovar is beyond redemption. Vukovar will not live again so long as its remaining residents survive to keep the memory of the massacre alive. And so long as
their ultra-nationalist government continues to profit from their pain and their loss.

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Vedrana

While talking to Vedrana, a small-town veterinarian and animal rights activist, I use some cliché about Vukovar being a chilling example of man’s inhumanity toward man, which elicits a deeply unexpected and disturbing response.

“What we see as humanity, caring for the injured and less fortunate, can be witnessed elsewhere in the living world, from my own work with stray and abandoned dogs or my cat and her kittens at home to lions out in the Sahara. The cruelty we misidentify as inhumanity, on the other hand, is in itself a truly human trait. The only other species that engages in acts of torture is the tiger, and even then only on their prey. Legend has it that wolves seek revenge, but I’ve seen no proof in their lesser cousins. There is no other species who commits such acts; torture, forced relocation, or genocide, on their own species. The one trait that truly sets the human race apart from the rest of the animal kingdom is our ‘inhumanity.’”

Trying desperately to hold on to some sense of hope and optimism after what I’ve seen, I argue “As a species,
we are differentiated by more than opposable thumbs and oppositional attitudes. We are the animal who wakes up in the morning with thoughts beyond what’s for breakfast, who wakes up with the thought that all things are possible.”

“Yeah?” she replies. ”You’ve been to Srebrenica, to Vukovar. Let’s not lie to ourselves. You and I, we’ve seen that all things truly are possible. Who wakes up in the morning and thinks of that? Humanity. Pteh,” she spits.

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Milos

Vedrana’s viewpoint was a real shock after the rest of my experiences here. The positivity of these people is legendary through the region. From Serbia to Bosnia to Dalmatia, when people heard I was on my way to Vojvodina, there was never an unkind word spoken. Just smiles and suggestions of what to eat and frequent comments of “Oh, you’ll be well taken care of”. And they’ve all been right. For all of the terrible things that have happened, the people of Vojvodina have not lost their sunny attitudes.

While talking with Ana again later on, her friend Milos shows up. At around 6’5”, he would tower over me even if I hadn’t been seated.
“Is this the fucking American?” he growls, his hand holding something I can’t see behind his back. I nod, hoping honesty will help me out of what looks like a terrible situation.

Milos laughs. “Drago mi je!” (A pleasure to meet you!), and hands me the beer he had behind his back. “Sorry. That was just too much fun. I couldn’t resist! So, what are you here for? Looking to bomb my country again?”

“Sorry about all that...” I respond as I think about how to explain my purpose here.

“What are you sorry about?” he cuts me off. “What were you, 10 years old? You know what I remember about 1999? For months, I didn’t go to school, and we all passed anyway! The sirens would go off, and that meant, to us, that it was time to go out and play. Every time a NATO bomber would hit our power plants, it meant we had to have a barbecue before the meat went bad!” Then he gets more serious. “You know the last time my family really spent quality time together? When you guys bombed us, the TV was out; my parents couldn’t go to work. We had no choice but to really be a family and get to know each other again. NATO bombing might be the only reason my family is still together. Sorry nista.”

I know he didn’t mean all of that. While civilian casualties were minimal in Vojvodina, the damage of the 1999 bombings is still destroying the region today. It left
towns under plumes of toxic smoke and without potable water for months. The fact that he could put such a positive lens on such a terrible thing was really exemplary of the Vojvodina mindset I’ve come to know.

“What have they shown you so far?” he asked.

“Farms, rakija, the castle, the most hospitality I’ve ever seen. The churches, the coffee, the river and the big machine. They’ve shown me basically everything.”

“Everything, eh? That’s the icons, the symbols. Have they shown you how we party? Come, Mister American,” he invited me, “my band has a show this weekend. You will see how Vojvodina ‘gets down.’”

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Bucharest, Romania

“Adversity makes a man wise, not rich.” ~ Romanian Proverb

With days before Milos’s show, I decided to take an old friend up on an offer to meet up in the region. By “in the region,” I mean 20 hours away by train. On the train ride from Novi Sad to Bucharest, I found myself befriended by an Italian named Fabioxxii, traveling to spend a weekend with his Romanian girlfriend. A pleasant guy, the trip was largely uneventful aside from his, let’s

xxii because comedy has certain requirements, and fate seems to respect these
say “donation,” of 10 Euro to a sketchy Romanian on the train. If only I could have made such a donation and avoided the next part...

People often ask me, with time spent in the Balkans, the Mideast and the Caucasus, “What’s the worst city you’ve ever been to?” I used to just attempt to sidestep the question, “cuz there’s shit and there’s sunshine in every city.” Then I came to Bucharest. We Have A Winner.

As my train pulled into the city sometime around 2 in the morning, I noted the neglect that gave the image of a corrugated gypsy village superimposed upon the Port of Baltimore, done in Stalinist style. As I arrived, sleep-deprived and broke, I made my paranoid way to the ATM, cautious not to be spotted or followed. It seems I failed in this endeavor, as I was approached by a man with a hostel brochure promising me an empty room for $15/night. It seemed too good to be true, which is one of those phrases human nature has yet to evolve to fully respect. I thanked him and made my way to the taxi line. As I got in the back of the first marked cab, the man who’d handed me the flyer got in the passenger seat and the driver locked the doors.

They drove me around for 15 minutes, through graffitied neighborhoods coated in bulletholes and collapsing apartment buildings, extolling the evils of gypsies who rob you and telling me how Romania is the descendants of Rome and Bucharest the most cultured city...
I’d ever see, and they stopped the taxi and declared that we were there.

I got out and looked around to see nothing but a grey dilapidated communist façade, and declared “There is no hostel here...” The driver stood firm: “800 lei, please” (that’s around $350US). I restated “There is no hostel here! and No 800 lei!” to which my humble guide responded, slowly and deliberately like a James Bond villain, “Not. My. Problem.” and pulled a knife from his coat pocket. To ensure that I took him seriously, he slid the knife edge along the jacket I had been borrowing from a Serbian friend, lightly enough not to make it to my skin but with enough pressure to slice through the fine leather. Noticing that my kidneys were still intact and feeling it would be nice to keep them that way, I said OK and handed over all the money I had. A mere 800 lei, they were kind enough to leave me my credit cards and passport, and the next three hours were spent attempting to find my way back.

Along the tour back to the train station, I was met by an inhospitality that was jarring following life in Vojvodina. As I tried to orient myself back up the last three roads I recalled from inside the cab, I saw more stray dogs, roaming in packs, than I’d ever witnessed and avoided the sidewalks literally filled with dogshit. I passed a grocery store fittingly called “Angst” with two homeless dogs in tattered ancient unwashed sweaters, obviously once pets, now begging outside.
After what seemed like hours of walking, I came upon a respectable-looking man in a suit standing outside a bank, speaking accented English into a cell phone. The perfect person to direct me back, I asked “excuse me, do you speak any English?” to which he replied “No!” and returned, in English, to his phone call. I continued to walk and asked the question to three other people before, out of frustration, I drew the picture of a train on my palm and pointed at it. A very nice old man gesticulated wildly in three directions, and I followed my recollections of his waving arms until, with the barely-visible sun rising over it into the bleak Romanian sky, I finally found the train station.

With another 18 hours until my friend’s arrival, I began a renewed quest for sleeping arrangements. I finally found a 2-star (a generous rating) hotel near the station and put down about 40 Euro on a room. I passed out for the next eight hours and when I awoke it was dark outside already. Still, I decided to attempt to get in touch with people so I went downstairs to ask for directions to an internet cafe. This was not to be.

I found the concierge and asked him “Do you speak any English?”

“Maybe...” he responded.

“Maybe...?” I repeated.

“Maybe I get you ze girls? Veddy Veddy nice...”
I thanked him for the offer and made a beeline for the door.

I returned to the train station by way of the dog-infested streets. No exaggeration, there was a stray dog every ten feet, each one eating trash and barking at its neighbor. When they looked me in the eye, it seemed a glance of “don’t approach me, I won’t approach you. I’m happy with my trash, but I won’t hesitate to rip your throat out.” I decided this seemed a good deal and heeded the advice. I still thank the fates that they never approached. A year after my visit, a foreigner would be found mauled to death by one of these packs.

I got back to the train station to wait for my friend, but I was kicked out around 12:30am because the cops were “taking over.” No one could really explain what that meant, but it seemed intimidating enough that I decided not to pursue any such line of questioning. When I asked a young lady from rural Romania about it later, she rolled her eyes and quoted a line from the Rolling Stones. “’Just as every cop is a criminal, and all the sinners saints…’” Mick Jagger was talking about Bucharest. Those politia were more likely pimps or unloading drugs off an incoming train than ‘securing’ the station. And those taxi drivers who kidnapped you, they’ll never be found. Even if they’re caught, they’ll just pay your 800 Lei to the politia, head back to the taxi line, and do it all again.”
I found a closet-sized 24-hour café attached to the station and sat down to wait and caffeinate myself. If nothing else had convinced me of Bucharest’s problems, their coffee would have been enough. Though the café was indoors, there were two stray dogs at the feet of the chair I chose and the café’s denizens seemed to take it for granted. My friend showed up around 1:30am, we went to the hotel and slept until 5:30am and booked a train to anywhere else.xxxiii

The first train out took us to the castle of Vlad the Impaler, the basis of Dracula, from whence we caught another train, this time to the birthplace of the Romanian revolution, Timisoara, my friend’s final destination and for me a simple stopover en route back to Vojvodina, but as usual, life had other plans. When we arrived, around 10pm, the ticketers had never heard of either of the cities I was searching for, and the only Serbian train was to Belgrade at 5:50am. We stumbled around until we found the city center, where we sat at a friendly cafe until it closed around midnight. There were no rooms to be had, so we spent the rest of the night on the steps of Timisoara’s beautiful church trying our best not to freeze to death, fall asleep, or get robbed or arrested until walking back to the train station around 4am. Sleeping

xxxiii In fairness to Bucharest, two of the most important editors of this project come from this multi-faceted Balkan city and I take them at their word that there is another side, a side as interesting and beautiful as anything I could find in Novi Sad or Prague or Budapest or Kiev or anywhere else in Eastern Europe.
through the train ride, I arrived back in Vojvodina in time to catch Milos’ show.

I entered the club, completely unassuming on the outside, blending in with all the cracked, crumbling facades. Entering inside felt like going back in time a century or two, with red brick interior with exposed wooden support and cave-like stone archways. The buzz of the crowd, a relative silence by concert standards, was shattered as I made my way down the short stairs to the back of the club, toward the stage.

“We Go Nah Roke Deese Town, Roke Eet Een Sayeed Ah-Ote!” Thus started the most surreal musical experience of my life. “We Go Nah Roke Deese Town, Make Eet Screem And Shah-Ote!” Milos was on stage singing, an enormous man with mutton chops in full Elvis regalia and a back-up band of what looked like hungover lumberjacks. “We Go Nah Roke! Roke! Roke baybee Roke! Roke Teel We Pope Mon Roke Teel We Drope! We Go Nah Roke Deese Town, Roke Eet Een Sayeed Ooooote!” Scores of drunk, sweating Vojvodinian rock fans were cheering and singing along to the rockabilly stylings of Milos’ assault on American music. It was fantastic. Elvis, The Stray Cats, Johnny Cash and Chuck Berry would all have been proud, and probably as stupefied as I was.

Mere hours after returning from the European Union, supposedly a safe zone for Westerners, where I’d been kidnapped, robbed, blown off, and threatened by packs of
wild dogs, this crowd of disaffected teens and twenty-somethings, just the type to be spraying anti-NATO and anti-Western graffiti along the walls, were singing along with these American classics. Drunk and cheerful, coming together over songs in English about freedom, love, or just plain partying, the same concerts the US State Department had warned me away from were one of the most warm and welcoming environments an expat could hope for. I was home.

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**A Nation unto Itself**

The rockers are not the only ones who know how to party. Leaving *Kafana* once again, I’m forced to wonder what they put in my coffee. The first thing I hear is an accordion and a rhythmic stomping. Nevena mutters something foreign as I walk toward the noise, now accompanied by an equally rhythmic jingling, a satisfying “clink” as of a pocket full of coins. I walk out the door toward the noise to see a circle of beautiful young women in white dresses with black and red striped belts holding hands and dancing in a rotating circle, their long braided hair kept from flying by the crown of flowers atop their heads. The jingling was coming from the elaborate gold necklaces sewn to their blouses. The music began to
change as guitar and an instrument resembling the mandolin (they call it tamburica) was added, and a row of young men in full white uniforms with broad red belts and grey vests proceeded, clapping, from behind a tree toward the girls who unhooked their arms from one another and fell back so that the boys could take center stage with a funny little can-can-esque hop-kick. This descended into some arm movements straight from the Macarena and then the men and women were arm in arm, the women lifted with low, grunted “yup”s from the men as the music increased in speed. Another spin, arms unlocked, and the men broke into a Cossack-style squat-kick dance. The men all collapsed, the women attacked them with a series of high-pitched squeals, everyone took a shot of rakija from the bench behind them and funneled back into the building I’d just come out of.

“What did I just see?” I asked Nevena.

“I’m so sorry. Traditional dancing. Terrifying, I know. The accordion, it doesn’t help. Peasant stuff,” she tried catering to her “civilized” western guest.

“No, that was really cool,” I argued. I meant it. That had been awesome and, as usual, surreal. “Was that Serbian? Hungarian?”

“It was all of them, of course! It was Vojvodinian!” she said with obvious pride, then caught herself.

Ethnic supremacists have torn the Balkans apart before. The most powerful of these, Slobodan Milosevic,
rose to power, overthrew and disbanded a nation, and perpetrated two separate genocides, all on the power of a single moment’s ethnic rhetoric. “No one will ever dare to beat you again,” he told an old ethnic Serb in Kosovo who had just obviously lied about being beaten by ethnic Albanians. It was the moment that sparked Yugoslavia’s end and the beginning of a tragic decade. It was also the spark that stole Vojvodina’s autonomy as Milosevic’s puppets took power in the province. Today, Vojvodina’s ethnic supremacists are taking the Milosevic model, attempting to tear the region apart for their own shameless self-promotion. In Vojvodina, however, it will not work.

Each ethnicity in Vojvodina has their own outfit, their own dance, their own food from their homelands, but it all combines into the Lala identity, the dance, drink, food, song and dress of Vojvodina. It doesn’t matter if you’re Serb, Hungarian, Croat, German, Romanian. They’re all Lala here.

What defines a nation? Not a country or a state. It’s not sovereignty that bestows nationhood upon a people, but nationhood that bestows sovereignty upon that land. A nation is not necessarily a matter of ethnicity or race. A nation has much more to do with a shared culture and history, a sense of shared identity. Vojvodina is not filled with ethnic supremacists, save a few radicals and political

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xxiv See chapter “The Rhetoric of Risk, and the Risk of Rhetoric”
opportunists. The region’s shared culture, their dances, their drinks, their food and song, these elements come together to form a strong identity, strong enough to defy and deflect the genocides that have plagued their neighbors, all of them, for centuries.

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Faulty Parallels

Westerners have a tendency to look for parallels to situations, to give ourselves a frame of reference. I spent the first few months here ignoring the sage advice I was given by Professor John Rennie Short. “Don’t take anything for granted. Enter the situation with no preconceptions. Be an infant, and let your naïveté keep you from passing judgment or drawing unnecessary parallels.” I tried tying Vojvodina’s issues to anything else, just to grasp it. I started with the obvious, in Kosovo, then moved to the Bosnian divide when Kosovo didn’t fit. After going to Bosnia, I had to dismiss that parallel and look West to Belfast or East to the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Even Gaza and Israel failed the test. In the end, none of them fit.

Natasha was my sounding board for these ideas, and soundly rejected each of them. “Vojvodina is not equatable to Kosovo or to Gaza or to Northern Ireland or to Sri Lanka. Everyone else has a ‘fuck you, we’re not Brits,
we’re not Serbs or Israelis! We’re Irish, we’re Albanians or Gazans, and we are rightfully a part of Ireland, of Albania or Palestine!’ Vojvodina doesn’t want anyone to ‘fuck off’. We’re made up of everyone, and we want everyone to feel safe and welcome. We really just want to be left alone by a corrupt, oppressive state, left alone to be people, to be Vojvodina.”

She’s right. None of these are acceptable parallels. Kosovo’s independence is actually a consolation prize. They wanted to be part of Albania. Gaza didn’t want to be Palestine, but Egypt wouldn’t take them back after 1967. “Vojvodina is not Hungary, we are not Croatia, and we are most certainly not Serbia. Vojvodina wants to be Vojvodina. There’s only one parallel I can think of, from 250 years ago: America. We want to be free just to be us.”

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Was…

Poverty, inflation, government corruption, exploitation, industrial pollution, nationalist violence, racism, these stories don’t seem so radical, especially in comparison to the reports from the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Kosovo. But in fact the complaints issued thus far by the women of Vojvodina show merely how kind and forgiving the region really is. The facts stand that from 86
the time Slobodan Milosevic bussed in Serb protestors from the south to pretend to be Vojvodinians and overthrow the government to the renewed Serb exodus from Kosovo upon global recognition of its statehood in 2009, the Serb population of Vojvodina has increased by approximately 150,000, while the Hungarian population has lost 100,000, the Croats 25,000, Slovaks 15,000, Montenegrins 20,000 and several others reduced to negligible quantities.

Nearly two hundred thousand non-Serb Vojvodinians have been ethnically cleansed since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and this on top of the nearly hundred thousand that had been forcibly relocated by Serbia’s leaders in the decade between Tito’s death and the breakup. Reports of families who sought refuge from the worst of those wars in Hungary or Austria or Amsterdam returning to find their houses occupied by Serbs from Bosnia and Kosovo, their possessions sold or trashed and their floorboards and tiles ripped up to make the houses habitable to the occupiers’ goats and pigs, are commonplace and documented by external Hungarian interest groups and other former Yugoslav representatives. The displacement of 300,000 non-ethnic-majority citizens or more is equivalent to the effects of the conflict in Kosovo, and the number killed is likely
similar, but since it is not considered an organized effort, despite obvious evidence otherwise, the death toll in Vojvodina is uncounted. But these numbers, coming from the Yugoslav censuses of 1981 and 1991 and the Serbian censuses of 2002 and 2011, have not been cited to me by these women.

And so, for months I have been underestimating the women of Vojvodina. Autonomy, Freedom. Great words, great ideas, but even as I listened, I had disregarded them as pipe dreams, thought experiments I was more than happy to play along with, that these roundtable discussions had just been mental masturbation for which they were thankful for the audience but too timid to act upon. It was not until I was already a willing co-conspirator in a revolution that it finally dawned on me how real it was.

“There’s a lot of bitterness at Serbia,” begins Nevena, to the approving nods of the dozen or so women around the table. “Our Declaration of Independence could have been a veritable encyclopedia of complaints and injuries... But it can’t be. It won’t work if we’re bitter.”

“No,” chimes in Vedrana. “No, it won’t... It can’t even be independence we declare. Secession, while a political and economic prospect, will be viewed ethnically and seen as a slap in the face, an affront to Serbian honor, and

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xxv In Kosovo between 3,000 and 10,000, depending on the source.

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necessarily met with force. This was proven untrue by the Montenegrin secession of 2006, inspiring hope that another bloodless split is possible, but a split is not what we need. Doubtless, the people of Vojvodina have a veritable laundry list of complaints against the nation of Serbia, but we do not seek blood, we do not seek hate, we do not even seek payment or the formation of new borders. Our intent is not to pick scabs or open old wounds. Our ultimate goal is simply the inalienable right to self-determination.

“When the Serbian government demanded a rewriting of our Constitution in terms that fit a colony, not an autonomous province, that was the last straw. National boundaries are the same as battle lines, and we do not need an arbitrary line in the sand over which to fight. We seek an amicable relationship with Serbia, and we will work diligently to secure and maintain peace with all our borders, especially to the south. But we seek what is rightfully ours.”

“Thus,” continued Nevena, “In the crafting of a Declaration of Autonomy and a true people’s Constitution, it was vital...”

“Was...?” I whimper as I notice the pile of books and papers in the center of the table.

She hears the noise and notices me begin to turn pale. “Aaaah, he finally gets there. Welcome to the party! Shall I continue?”
I nod through my panic, unable to stop staring at this pile of potentialities. I’d seen the outside of a Serbian prison in person, and the inside on film. What form of treason had I become involved in?

“...WAS vital to remain positive and future-oriented. A list of past injustices is valid, and found voice in our Preamble, but we must keep negativity out of the rebirth of our nation.”

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A Work of Art

The papers sitting on the table before me are a book unto themselves, but for the purposes of turning nearly a decade of labor into a book of around 200 pages, a summary is really all I can offer here without going off on too many tangents.

They’ve covered everything, and I really mean that. The importance not just of regional or state rights but of individual city and village rights, getting down to the micro-versions of Thomas Jefferson’s anti-federalist philosophies. They’ve studied everyone from Thomas Paine to the crotchety old Edmund Burke (I’ll omit their feelings on him for the sake of younger readers). Executive power versus strong legislatures (they favor a stronger parliament with an executive figurehead). They’ve
explored the issues that have arisen 200 years later from the vagueness of The United States’ founding documents and seek not simply to tighten the reins on their own version, but also to respect through the vagueness that these are intended as living, evolving documents.

Their studies cover German legal scholars on privacy and Italian legal experts on the effects of liberalization. Their synopsis of Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence,

A Declaration is intended as a document of beauty, poetry that governs our existence, a literary statement of intent. Kosovo’s ironically-sized 12-step Declaration was a business document to appease the UN and the EU, and it looks like the work of a small punished child writing rules of behavior on the blackboard. Democracy is not a business and the foundation of a nation should never be appeasement or the very concept of democracy is diminished...

shows a respect for the potential immortality of what they are doing here, as well as its potential evolution into something greater, and their comparison of this to Montenegro’s Declaration shows a healthy appreciation for regional relativism.

The depth and breadth of their work shows how truly committed to their cause they are, and I am awestruck and honored to be able to release here the fruits of their labor:
Declaration of Self-Determination of the Republic of Vojvodina

As the world’s first modern democracy declared at its founding, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These rights have been the foundation of all free societies for two centuries, yet have been beyond our grasp since, ironically, the death of the dictator Josip Broz Tito.

A gateway country but not a warrior people, subjugation has been an expected part of our history. Flags were never important to us. So long as we could keep our ethnic identities and our freedoms, submission to a crown seemed an acceptable sacrifice. Even in our colonization, we remained self-governing within the confines of the governing empire. When Milosevic’s coup overthrew Vojvodina’s elected government, it was the first time in our long history that we became colonized against our will. Vojvodina never previously rebelled against our rulers because, until Serbia, we chose to be ruled, and with that understanding, the Great Powers under whom we lived were respectful and just. Serbia is not just. Serbia is not respectful, and we no longer choose to be ruled.

We do not seek a confrontation with the Republic of Serbia. Vojvodina’s history and future are built upon the proud accomplishments of all its peoples; Serb, Hungarian, Slovak, Roma, Romanian, Montenegrin, Rusyn, Croatian. We seek
peace with the native lands of all of our peoples, and respect within Vojvodina each culture’s traditions and histories.

We are a nation of varied cultures, ethnicities, languages and religions. Our history is one of peace and tolerance for all, and our future will be built upon that legacy.

We seek neither compensation nor redress for historical wrongs from any occupying power. We do, however, seek the right to control our own resources and property. The recent sale of our land and resources to foreign firms without allowing a vote in Vojvodina’s parliament is alone reason enough for secession. We seek the return of our property and the renegotiation of contracts fitting the needs of the people of Vojvodina.

We pass no judgment on the political decisions made by the citizens of the Republic of Serbia. The consequences of their actions are a matter between them, their children, and God. These are not our decisions, however, and we will no longer be controlled by the whims of others.

Unfair taxation being the cause of the first democratic revolution, we seek services for payment rendered. We seek the right to function as economic players in our own lives, not subordinates to the state.

In our quest for self-determination, we seek merely these inalienable rights promised all humanity in the civilized world, many of which our people have never experienced:

-The right to worship freely in whichever fashion we choose, so long as it does our neighbors no harm.

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- The right to nonviolently protest and petition government and business.

- The right to a secure legal framework to protect us from arbitrary unchecked authority.

- Above all, the right to self-determination.

Though there remain many more rights to be enumerated, their place is in our Constitution. Above are the most vital of those we have been denied. We seek now our rightful place among the civilized nations of the world.

This Declaration that we have drafted is the will of many, but it has not yet been ratified as the will of the people. It is the product of years of intense but secretive labor and lifetimes of experience. It stands as an example of what we will work to achieve. We are not the elected Representatives of our Countrymen-and-women. We are the Daughters of Vojvodina. We are numerous and we are serious. We stand for freedom, for our future, for the future of our families and children and our history. We stand for a better life, and we choose now as the point where we can no longer wait under the oppressive weight of our colonial status. We present here our founding principles to our allies and to the world.

**The Daughters of Vojvodina**
Kipling in the Balkans

There’s no better imperialist than Rudyard Kipling. A true believer in The White Man’s Burden and in the British Empire, he was a masterful analyst of imperial power and its limits. Much of this pile reads like Kipling.

Paragraph two of the Declaration of Self-Determination is a brilliant synopsis of the man’s early work, wholly accidentally. “A gateway country but not a warrior people, subjugation has been an expected part of our history… Vojvodina never previously rebelled against our rulers because, until Serbia, we chose to be ruled, and with that understanding, the Great Powers under whom we lived were respectful and just. Serbia is not just. Serbia is not respectful, and we no longer choose to be ruled.”

David Gilmour, Kipling’s biographer, describes the conclusion of The Man Who Would Be King as “a warning that empires can be overthrown when the customs of subject peoples are too greatly violated.”

The British, in seeking assimilation and servitude while lending no respect to native cultures lost all right to rule and were cast out, violently, from Afghanistan, India, and to a lesser extent the American colonies. Serbia may not meet quite so violent a fate, given the pacifistic history and commitment of the people of Vojvodina, but they have proven the hubris of their empire. Others cast them
off, yet they did not learn responsibility and now Vojvodina seeks their own freedom.
The Documents

The documents detailing the sale of Naftagas, the Serbian oil and gas utility, to Russia are also included within this pile, under the folder marked “Injustices.” I don’t want to know where they got them. Perhaps they’re public domain. Perhaps there’s a sympathetic whistleblower. The company was “sold” to Russia for an amount equal to two years’ profit. The problem with the sale of a Serbian national company is that all of the profits are, in fact, generated exclusively in Vojvodina, as all of the sites where oil is drilled are located in Vojvodina. Far too many of Vojvodina’s workers were laid off, and not low-level workers but lawyers and industry experts, crippling the region’s skilled workers. However the documents were attained, they give an interesting perspective to the line

We … seek the right to control our own resources and property. The recent sale of our land and resources to foreign firms … reason enough for secession. We seek the return of our property and the renegotiation of contracts fitting the needs of the people of Vojvodina.

The Russians will not smile upon this, but given the nature of Russia’s paternal, paternalistic and patronizing relationship with Serbia, there’s not much of Vojvodina’s cause that finds a sympathetic ear in Russia.
“...We seek services for payment rendered...”

I thought this was a typo when I first read it. But it’s actually an ingenious rhetorical flair, reversing the common “payment for services rendered.” The ridiculous taxation system that crushes Vojvodina’s farmers like Stojan, that causes them to slaughter their dairy cows and cripple their capacities, truly affects Vojvodina hugely disproportionately to the rest of Serbian land. Vojvodina makes up one quarter the area and less than one third the population of Serbia, yet takes 70% of the tax burden. Their taxes are used to pay not just for the well-being of their neighbors in Serbia proper, but to the Serbs still maintaining their presence in Kosovo, a political battle in which Vojvodina remains implicated but uninvolved. This is not the service for which their taxes were intended.

A Message

It must be worth mentioning, before we move off from this document, the subtle changes that it went through even before reaching my eyes. The folder from which I pulled it, right at the top of the pile, was labeled
“Declaration of Self-Determination,” but that was not its original name. Crossed out above this title are the words “Declaration of Autonomy” and above that, “Declaration of Independence.” If this weren’t a message, they’d have found another folder to put this in and discarded the evidence of previous grandiosity. They wanted me to know where the movement came from, where it could go. They wanted me to understand the delicate nature of the subject matter with which I was dealing. And they wanted me to understand, in case the other two were obvious, that they themselves understood this.

“You’re not dealing with amateurs,” was the message. Well, I’m deep within this thing now, so I hope to hell that’s true.

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Flags

Understanding the importance of symbolism to the Balkan tribes, I ask what I intended to be an enlightened and easy question. “Which flag will you fly?” I am greeted with yet another unexpected answer as Tatjana’s temper flares.

“Fuck your flags. All of them. No stars, no stripes, no eagles, no lions, no suns. If you want to wave something, wave a book or a declaration. Your code of beliefs. What is
the foundation of your life, of your movement? For you, maybe it’s the US Constitution, maybe it’s the Torah. For me…”

She stops for emphasis, picking up the folder. “…For me, it is this Declaration. Embroider that on a piece of cloth and let it fly. That’s my flag. I pledge allegiance not to a two headed eagle, not to a series of stars, stripes and colors. I pledge to the founding ideals, not a piece of cloth. This, right here, what you are writing, this is my flag.”

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Ziveli!

At this point, I have come to understand that it is too late to talk them out of their decision, and as I consider further, beyond my fear and my concern for the safety of these women I’ve come to care for deeply, I can’t be sure I’d want to talk them out of this if I could. Their complaints are more than valid, their future is not certain even in the status quo, and they have earned, even more than their recently independent neighbors, the right to freedom and self-determination. Still, I voice my concerns for their safety and that of their land and their kin.

“Is there at least a plan for what comes after your declaration?” I ask. “Have you planned, beyond the constitutional provisions, for your national defense?
We’ve all here seen what the Serbian Army is capable of when all Kosovo asked for was autonomy. How can you do more than just hope you end up like Montenegro and not Kosovo?”

Vedrana, whose perspective on the Serbian capacity for destruction already changed my life, decides to take this question.

“It is illegal in any war to take civilian lives or to use civilians as bargaining chips, pawns or hostages. These are the actions of terrorists, but also of the JNA\textsuperscript{xxvi} in the wars of the 1990s. We understand the threat of Serbian state aggression. Ours is a land, and therefore a movement, of Peace, and we will do all we can to keep it as such. Our movement will not be a war. The JNA modus operandi against independence movements, as you saw in Vukovar, is to leave the newly freed peoples nothing worth fighting for, and autonomy is treated no more kindly.”

“Salting the earth...” I mutter. Then, again, just as insensitively, “Is freedom worth the annihilation of your homeland?”

“There has been much discussion about this” Natasha sighs. “While the exploitation and pettiness of Serbian rule is crushing our land, our spirits and our future, the answer remains no. Autonomy is not worth the death and destruction another Balkan War will bring. This is why

\textsuperscript{xxvi} Yugoslav Peoples’ Army
we’ve worked so hard to find another way, and why we keep repeating the importance of force as defense and defense only. We will not take our cues from thugs like Guevara or from soulless opportunists like Arafat. We will not use hate and violence and fear as our tactics, nor will we seek to generate those acts from our opponents to prop ourselves up in the court of world opinion on the bodies of our brethren.

We will follow the examples of true leaders and patriots like Jose Torrijos, Martin Luther King or Thomas Paine. We will fight for what we believe in, for what is ours, but not on the Serbian military’s terms. There are many here who would, like those heroes past, be willing to lay down their lives for what they believe in, a Free Vojvodina. The tools of the modern world, however, the press, the United Nations, and careful, strong diplomacy, will hopefully be enough to keep this from being necessary.”

“However...” chimes in Izzy, “we are not ignorant idealists. We know what we’re up against. When Milosevic went to The Hague, the rest of the world thought everything had changed. Sure, there’s no outright ethnic cleansing today, but the country is still ruled by the same people. Balkans are by nature proud people. Serbs are the most proud, the most stubborn, the most begrudging when their pride is hurt. There’s no telling how many lives the NATO intervention in 1999 saved, if
any,” she says as heads around the table nod solemnly. “What is obvious, though, is how far East it pushed the Serbian mindset. Our current prime minister was Milosevic’s disciple, chosen by the Serbian people on a platform of strong anti-feminism, anti-westernism, and Serb supremacy…”

Shortly after Milosevic’s extradition, we really had a chance for political progression and relevance. His name was Zoran Djindjic…”

At the mention of his name, some of the women cross themselves sadly, others simply swoon.

“Zoran was a beautiful, brilliant man. He was honest, witty, and hardworking. I don’t know how he ever became Prime Minister…”

She used his first name like she was talking about an old friend. If this wasn’t enough to show an outsider like myself how much love there was for this man, the silence that met her off-color political joke was. Apparently, Djindjic is too serious a subject even for the old Balkan sense of humor.

“Zoran was a reformer” Izzy continues. “He opposed Milosevic, he had met with your President Clinton, he was cracking down on Serbia’s growing Mafija, making enemies in and out of government and making a name for himself.”


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“Yeah, same ending, too,” snarks Natasha.

Glaring at Natasha, Izzy takes back the conversation.

“But the thing for which we most love our Prime Minister was his understanding of the Vojvodina situation. Certainly no Serb politician in the nationalistic 90s could ever support our independence, but Djindjic pushed for a restoration of our autonomy within the Serbian state. Until then, that was all we ever wanted. But the hope represented by Djindjic was cut short in March of 2003, when he was murdered by assassins of his own government’s Special Operations Unit. That was the end of our last hope for reform, for unity with and freedom within Serbia. When his successor, Vojislav Kostunica, a disciple of Milosevic, took implicit credit for the act and was then reelected, that was when we stopped believing we could ever be equals, that we could ever be whole again.

“What Izzy means to say…” Nevena interrupts, refocusing the conversation, “is that we know what we’re dealing with. We know the risks, and we’ve made plans to protect ourselves, but without moving toward secession, we’re dead anyway.

The Serbs have already paid the price for the ethnic genocide committed in the 90s. In fact, to their credit, they are the only former Yugoslav people to accept guilt for their crimes, in ways that their neighbors have not. That
said, the Serbian government has since committed a much more subtle crime, a cultural genocide, in Vojvodina.”

“That’s a pretty touchy word to throw around,” I comment.

“You want me to candy coat it?” Nevena shoots back. “I won’t. But I’ll explain if you want. When the Serbs were exiled from Croatian territories in 1991, Vojvodina had already lost our autonomy and the Serbian government sent all the refugees here. Later in the 90s, the situation repeated itself with the Bosnian Serbs. This is not their country, but they have replaced our customs with their own, they expect us to learn their language without learning ours, and as they grow their families at twice our rate, combined with a sustained rate of immigration, within a generation we’ll be outcasts in our own homeland, our cultures and languages and customs, all of which we were free to keep under centuries of foreign rule, will be forgotten even by our children and grandchildren.”

Definitionally, genocide requires a specific ethnicity to be the sole victim. It’s not a genocide, but it does beg the question: How many Vojvodinians have been ethnically cleansed? The data is staggering. The demographic shift has been in the range of a quarter million, well over 100,000 of them Hungarian, over 75,000 Croats, and tens of thousands of other Yugoslav ethnicities shifted out, over a third of all ethnic minorities, many having their homes
stolen or “reoccupied,” replaced by Serb ethnic refugees, themselves forced out by ethnic extremists in Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia. This cleansing is far more vast than anything seen in Kosovo. It’s not a genocide, there’s little blood and the lives lost are hard to document, but if Bosnia was a genocide, Vojvodina at least counts as a crime against humanity. Yet we in the West sit back and watch, as we have for a quarter century, bored without bloodshed on a wide scale, ignoring our own historic wrong.

“But we know,” Isabela jumps back in,” we will not simply be assimilated. We will be exiled, or victims of the next inevitable round of Serbian aggression. To protect our history, to preserve our culture, but even more, to safeguard our lives, we cannot ignore this threat. I know it is cliché to quote Martin Luther King, especially to an American, but we recognize ‘the fierce urgency of now’. If we do not act soon, it will be too late.”

When the beautiful culture and people of Vojvodina are no more, then we’ll act. We’ll scream. We’ll accuse. We’ll blame. We’ll excoriate the Serbs and ask how anyone could let this happen again. But we let this happen. So we’ll build a museum to this extinguished race, these millions of people we let go quiet into that good night. We’ll declare never again. We’ll demonstrate loudly, build another institution to prevent it, and hope that new
bureaucracy does a better job protecting the next endangered people.

On that note, Nadja raises her glass.

“Ziveli!” To Life!

“To Vojvodina!”
Inevitability

It’s been two years. They asked me not to publish until they were ready. I knew I shouldn’t listen, but I did, and I can only blame myself. I never expected it to get this bad. If I’d given them the publicity they needed, maybe the support could have been here. It wasn’t targeted. It was barely political, beyond the vast political machine that heads the corruption of this beautiful land. A vast network of political ugliness and dark-humored fates conspired to bring it all crashing down.

Nenad and Tamara are sitting in prison. Their child is being cared for by Tamara’s mother. All those times Nenad crossed himself at the border weren’t enough. Serbian border guards searched the car, confiscated their purchases, exaggerated the charges when there wasn’t enough money for a bribe and put them away. I don’t know how long they’ll be in there, but it’s been eight months already.

Vesna lost her job and her hope when the Serbian government gifted her company to the Russians. She’s not old enough for retirement, but there are no jobs left and her pension was in Dinars, its value falling faster than Greece’s economy. She’s using those skills from the 90s to keep her family fed, but the joy’s gone from her.
Milos is not the same person he was when he scared me shitless with a beer. It started when the bank where he worked as a security guard closed. He’s now a taxi driver in Novi Sad. I reminisce about his happiness at our first meeting. He nearly cries. “Me and Ana, we were the happiest. For all of her political speak about revolution and taking back what should have been hers, we could laugh and laugh and talk for hours about tomorrow... Thoughts of tomorrow, thoughts of yesterday, God it hurts. I just want a life. I don’t want a big house, an apartment is fine. I’m happy with a Yugo from ten years ago. I just want to know that there will be enough food for me and Ana. I don’t know that I’ll ever be a father, as much as we wanted to. Ana and I, we don’t even have sex anymore. How could I bring a child into this place? With no promise of survival, let alone happiness?”

Nadja’s gone. A rope and a note, that’s it. The hopelessness was too much for her. She’ll never bring her family’s dreams to fruition, and she couldn’t give the state the satisfaction of holding her back. “I’m not letting them trap me,” she wrote. Physically and figuratively, she beat them the only way she could.

Even the geography is hopeless. The part of the Tisa river that wasn’t industrialized used to be the single spot of good humor in the lives of thousands of Vojvodina’s people. When city governments found their budgets empty from the swindling of elected officials and
contractors, they cut everything they could, from streetlights to spraying the Tisa for mosquitoes. The river is now overrun with insects and animals, the town’s reduced to third-world fears of rabies or other contagious diseases and the fear of simple thieves.

Vedrana’s still a veterinarian, and still just as jaded and bitter, but her husband just lost his company when a new bill on small businesses surprised everyone with a Grandfather Clause: a new tax that started six months before the law was even proposed. This seemed to me even more reason to organize, to get the hopeless masses to rise up. Vedrana’s way with practical philosophy only gets more scathing with time. “Who can have a revolution when they can’t even eat? We could have done it. Two years ago, we could have started something. There was food. There was enough on our plates and in our houses to think, to hope. We knew then that Vojvodina could do better if we were left alone. Now we can’t even hope for that. It was Serbia, but their corruption spread into Vojvodina. We are no better.” She’s done with the Daughters, done with the future.

Nevena’s fled. She’s not in exile, she just knows that the darkness will catch up with her if she stays too long. She’s spent the last two years between England and the US, interning in Parliament, volunteering on political campaigns, studying social change and social justice. She’s
changed hugely, and she’s their greatest remaining hope, not just the movement’s but all of Vojvodina’s.

“Do you remember” she asked, “when we told you that it was starting to look like the 90s again? You fed me some shit platitude about ‘perspective’ and how ‘the bombs aren’t dropping’. In the 90s, my family lived out of suitcases in case we had to flee, but all the children played in the streets before and after the air raid sirens, all the parents would play cards and everyone would swim in the Tisa when there was a momentary peace. It is no longer like this. There are no street lights today, there are bad people on the streets at night... You told me a story about a woman you’d met in Israel, a woman who grew up in a concentration camp. There was one quote from her that stuck with me: ‘I never knew to hope. Children growing up in depression-era Germany hoped for a toy train, for a doll to play with, for the end of the war. I’d never known life with a toy, life without war. I hoped for a bigger piece of bread...’ I knew hope growing up. My parents made sure I could be a kid and could climb a tree or swim in a river or play with a doll or a toy truck. I never worried about where my next meal was coming from. Even if it was just bread and soup, I know I would eat. Today’s kids? They hope for a bigger piece of bread, or that there will be soup at all.”

“People want to have a life. Just a modest life. Not even fancy things. Just to feed their families and not worry
about being able to eat dairy or meat or things that are taken for granted in so many places, but are considered special here because they cost more than potatoes. If they can’t get it in a just manner, they will get it illegally because it is a matter of sustenance. A man was found recently after having accidentally electrocuted himself while trying to steal electric wires for scrap materials. That leads us to the hundreds of problems that plague Serbia, that have seeped into Vojvodina too, from corruption and thievery to nepotism and appointments to public positions. We can’t wait any longer. Vedrana is right about one thing: It may not be time for a revolution. But she’s wrong about the reason: If we don’t institute political reforms and root out corruption, the starvation and disease and misery will lead inevitably to armed revolution, not by us but by the entire nation of Serbia.”

“I have to go back. When my education is done, I can’t stay in the West. I could, you know, I could find a husband, settle down, live in London or Washington or New York, and I would be safe, I would be secure, but how could I live with myself that I’d abandoned my Sisters? Vojvodina is still salvageable. I have to go back.”

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Remembrance

“That church you love so much, those golden icons and arches, it was not all so beautiful on that day. A dark shadow was cast upon us all, Catholic, Orthodox, non-believer, that muted all the beauty in the world. The sun was shining cruelly, and I hated it, I wanted to blot it out of the sky, it should have been raining. Our beautiful Nadja was gone, the sun could not shine, but it went on shining, that asshole,” says Vedrana, fighting back tears. Nadja was her closest friend, the bright flip side to her notoriously dark outlook.

“We stood there, watching as she was lowered into the ground. Only the family needs to wear black, but she was my daughter, and I will wear black. We all wore black, many of us will for the rest of the year, out of mourning for our family. They took my daughter…” mourns Vesna.

“My grandmother called it a beautiful funeral. She attends many, mostly people she doesn’t know, just to see if the funeral is ‘beautiful’. How can a funeral be beautiful, especially Nadja’s?” asked Nevena. “There were flowers, there were tears, there were mourners and a priest, though he wasn’t there officially as it was a suicide, that is what she meant by beautiful, but there was something else in this funeral. There was a sense of underlying rage. As if the death had been a murder, not a suicide. The priest expressed it, in his civilian role as a friend, angrier at the
situation that brought her to her conclusion than the unholy act she committed. We were crying, all of us, tears of pain and loss, but if we had been free to, the sobs would have been drowned out by screams of rage.”

The priest might have been able to muster more righteous rage against the sacrilege of Nadja’s suicide had she been the first, but of his congregation, she was no less than the fourth that year, though she was the youngest to go through with it. A farmer who couldn’t feed his family. A pensioner who couldn’t feed even herself. A hairstylist who’d had to close shop, tried working in the black market and found that, yes, it can always get worse. There were also the car crashes, the ones that looked questionably or even obviously intentional. No one wants to call those suicides, but a lot of them were.

These are not fighters. Vojvodina is a nation of peace, the jolly drinking and overeating capital of Eastern Europe. Yet Serbia has managed to plunge this most cheerful region into a depression that’s taken the lives of such beautifully joyful individuals as Nadja. Intentional or not, Serbia is playing a dangerous game. Not all, or even most, will go gentle into that good night. What comes next, Serbia has brought upon themselves.

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The More Things Change…

Gaunt and intense, his hair and cheekbones are angled in such a way as to invoke the image of a wolf. Affable until crossed, tonight his brow is furrowed and his eyes bore through you. He’s not a large man, and he’s not a loud man, but when he speaks, people listen. His pipe rests firmly on the right side of his mouth as he steps out of his car, opens the door for the limping loudmouth in his passenger seat who has not shut up for the hour they’ve been driving, and walks into the auditorium. He walks to the front, not waiting for his companion. This is not a night for convention and propriety. This is a night of movement, of upheaval. He stands in front of the table at the front of the room, before a crowd of his countrymen and state agents and glares intensely into them. As the loudmouth arrives to the table, they both take their seats beside the already seated, far more jovial fat man at the center.

The Fat Man rambles pleasantries for a few minutes until the Loudmouth abruptly cuts in. Everyone deals with agitation differently. The Fat Man was not agitated. Upheaval is just another form of social promotion. Politics is about power, not about principle, and the Fat Man could be just as happy as a privatizing capitalist oligarch as he had been as a high-level Communist Apparatchik, all he had to do was rebrand and take control. While the Wolf’s
agitation was merely palpable, the Loudmouth’s was audible. He begins spouting insults at the Fat Man, disappointment at the crowd for nodding along, calling for insurrection, threatening violence to the establishment and the Fat Man personally in the form of grassroots retribution. His voice went from incredulous to shrill over the two minutes he was allowed to speak before the Wolf knocked lightly on the table.

“If I may?” he cuts in on the Loudmouth.

“Reci,” Speak, please, the Loudmouth says deferentially and finally relinquishes control of the conversation.

“My comrades up here are not enemies, though they may not know it. We are all here brothers and sisters at a time of incredible possibility. What comes next, be it autonomy or independence, our lives will never be the same. We are not going back to the time of Tito, we are going to rise up from this poverty and find our place among nations, but do we want to do that as a colony of another nation? Or do we, Vojvodina, want control of our own future? My friends up here disagree on how we must get there, but they both seek for us prosperity. One through the status quo, one through the violent example of our neighbors, but every one of us wants the best for our nation. I am here to tell you that, though I respect my friends at the table with me, they are both wrong. The status quo is not working, will not bring us wealth and
prosperity and will consolidate the power of thieves and murderers. But violent upheaval makes us, a once-moral nation, no better than the thieves and murderers we overthrow. We can be different, because we are different. We are a nation of brotherhood, of love. It is why we were able to be affluent under Tito, under Maria Teresa, under the Turks. Choose your own fate, my countrymen, and don’t ever forget who we are. We are Vojvodina, and now is our time.”

The applause starts small, rises slowly, seriously, deliberately to a deafening crescendo of regional pride. The people rise to their feet and continue to cheer and clap as the men leave the building. They know that they have started something, have planted a seed of hope that they must water and tend for weeks or months as it blooms into a healthy movement. They will be the fathers of a nation, and they are ready. They drive down to a bar the next town over. As they open their first beer, the Wolf feels an object stick into his back, hears the click of a hammer drawn back. The Loudmouth, however, already has his gun drawn, and it’s larger and pointed underneath the would-be assassin’s jaw. “You can shoot him, and he might die, but there is no way you come out of this alive. Care to rethink this?”

“If we don’t kill each other now, be aware, others will be coming, and they know who your families are,” the gunman stared at the Wolf. “They know which rooms
your daughters sleep in, they know which house is your mother’s. Loose words are more dangerous than loose bullets.”

The Wolf left the next week for Prague. He knew no one, but he was resourceful and he knew that his family could not be safe if he were with them. The Loudmouth, with no children of his own, promised to protect them and promptly shut his mouth. That was 15 years ago. The Loudmouth kept his promise, became a powerful player for the state and kept the Wolf’s family safe, but the dream, the seed they planted that night, left unwatered, untended, sat in the ground where they dropped it. The Fat Man and his friends took power as planned.

The Loudmouth died the other day. Cancer, nothing violent. Having no children of his own, he was godfather to the Wolf’s daughters, who still don’t know the story. They’ve never considered following in their father’s footsteps. They thought he’d abandoned them. He sent all his money back to them while working in Prague, sent them presents regularly, and he did finally come back, but they’ll always resent him for leaving, and he still doesn’t think it’s safe for them to know what he did for them. But others know what could have been. And today it could be again.

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No Land for Heroes

The Loudmouth kept his head down and his mouth shut. He worked within the system, gained the trust of the untrustworthy and the protection of the truly powerful, and when he died quietly and peacefully, it was sitting on a pile of secrets and a sizeable treasure. He accrued what some might see as a corrupt wealth, but he had kept his word to protect the Wolf’s family, and he died with honor and without regret. He grappled every day with the disappointment of life under the Fat Man and his cronies, working for them and with them, but he made his peace.

The Wolf never returned to politics. He understood the Loudmouth’s methods and sacrifice, and he loved him dearly for the price he was paying to keep his daughters safe. But they both knew that the Loudmouth’s days were limited, and that when he passed, there’d be no memory of his word. So the Wolf also kept his head down.

The Fat Man was so successful in his rebranding, from Communist to Serb Nationalist to Vojvodinian Regionalist that he’s never tasted the hard times, and today he is the political director for the leading party in Vojvodina. He hands out high-paying governmental appointments to his friends like shots of home-brewed rakija, embezzles from local utilities and services, and has not paid his workers in months. He is, in short, a politician, like any other, heralded as a hero, a man of the
people, a hard-driving anti-imperialist and anti-nationalist, looking out for both Vojvodina and Serbia. In fact, he’s a crony capitalist starving his countrymen, but with men like the Wolf and the Loudmouth fearing for their and their families’ safety, with the assassinations of heroes like Zoran Djindjic, and with the public knowledge of the ties between leaders like the Fat Man and the Mafija and their mutual love of force, there are no heroes left.

But maybe Vojvodina doesn’t need a hero. The disillusionment of the people with life under the Fat Man is manifesting itself in strange, sometimes ugly, often beautiful, always intriguing forms. Something’s got to give, but Balkan tragedies are littered with the remains of heroes. With or without heroes, the bulk of conceivable futures look bleak, ranging from the tragic grey urban undeath of other Serbian cities, to the brown agricultural decay of untended and unkept farmland, to the crimson bloodshed of another furious revolution. But there is a single bright beacon in this sea of despair. Maybe it’s time for a heroine.

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It Spreads

There’s a madman screaming on the stoop below the church of Novi Sad’s Petrovaradin fortress. He’s obviously
Serbian. A straight, greying brown beard, a furious spark in his eyes underneath his furrowed brow. His accent is not Hungarian, though it could be of the Bosnian mountains. I’m quickly informed by Vedrana that he’s of Southern Serb descent, probably close to Kraljevo where life was disrupted by an earthquake recently and still has not returned to normal. I usually turn the other way when I see a screaming Balkan (it can only lead to tragedy), but something attracts me, and Vedrana is not pulling my sleeve (at least not very hard) to move on. He’s not screaming the terrifying words that usually send me slowly, unnoticeably the other way down the street, Jevreji (Jews), Amerikanci, Muslimani, or even worse “Kosovo Je Srbija”. No, this is a strange one. A crowd has gathered, and people walking to the convenience stores and bars down the street have slowed or stopped and turned toward him with raised eyebrows. I see no raised fists among the crowd, hear no slogans, just intent listening to a frothing madman, I get close enough to hear when he begins to increase pitch and volume.

“...As you stand there, Egyptians have taken to the streets to bring down the system of poverty and corruption that has starved them for 30 years. As you shift your weight from the left foot to the right, they’re being beaten, killed and locked up. You wander along, thinking perhaps of your dinner, perhaps of your drink, perhaps of this summer’s vacation, the one you’ll never afford. I’ve
mentioned Egypt. Ooh, that sounds nice, warm, historic. You were really thinking of the beaches of Sharm el-Sheikh, yes? Why did they have to protest now? Why couldn’t they wait another year, or at least until after the summer? Stupid protesters, ruining your vacation plans. Now you’re mad.”

He starts to sound sarcastic. It’s a bitter, grating sound. “Like it’s a shame to be hungry, poor, humiliated. It’s been a way of life! Moving one loan to another for years, at this point you don’t even know to which bank you owe what money, and those filthy Arabs are good for nothing but oil and tourism. Have you ever wondered...? No, not you, you wonder about nothing, not in your own life, certainly not about some dirty Egyptian. What’s wrong with them? They’ve got pyramids, dammit! If you had just one pyramid, you could feed half your village! Not the other half, they’re the wrong ethnicity, let them starve.” Now it’s anger, a welcome, familiar reprieve.

“Nothing interests you, and why would it? The folks you elect year after year keep screwing you, but they’re yours, so they can. Is it so different in the crazy autocratic Middle East? Those are just states like your own. And in those states, there are people, not just sand. Unlike you, permanently stuck to your rope, moving when your masters move, the marionettes of Egypt just came to life. Yes, you, the speakers of what was once Serbo-Croatian, the citizens of nations boiling over since their creation.
You, just like the Egyptians, have been fucked by thieves for decades, but you forget to mind it yourselves, why would you care when it happens to an Arab? A Muslim, probably. It matters not that not all Arabs are Muslims, where would you have learned a fact like that? What solidarity would you have with an Arab? And even so, what could you do for them if you wanted to? Go listen to the new turbofolk hit, drown out your own deafening silence with the grinding thrusts of another screeching bleach blonde nationalist, hoping your corrupt leaders will pass a provision allowing you to purchase yesterday’s bread cheaper instead of having to quietly ask the neighborhood baker to make you a deal. What about that is shameful, humiliating, abnormal? You’ve grown accustomed to yesterday’s bread. The fresh stuff is too fluffy, it goes down too easy, you barely notice you ate. Yesterday’s sits like a rock. You’ve convinced yourself that’s how you like it, and the government-controlled newspaper tells you that this older bread is healthier. That same health caused Tunisia and Egypt to erupt in flames. But stay silent. Don’t move. Just rot in your faceless misery…”

He could’ve led a movement, right then and there. Those people in the street, he could have brought them all together, connected their friends, that was a moment he could have marched them to Belgrade, set himself ablaze
and been the next Tunisia, but he went out with a fizzle, not a bang.

“You disgust me,” he spat. And then he turned away and walked up the stairs.

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The Gravedigger

It’s been pretty calm in Serbia, despite the unrest spreading through the Middle East, right into neighboring Turkey. Too calm I guess. There’s been almost no violence, no hooliganism since the Gay Pride Parades back in July 2010. I guess they wore themselves out, what with 60 hooligans in jail, 80 police officers in hospital, 10 bystanders injured, and 2 million Euros in damages from the petrol bombs, incendiaries and stones. The right wing nationalists basically burned their own city to the ground. “Next conflict,” said Tatjana, “NATO should just stage a Gay Pride March. These self-inflicted wounds have done just as much damage as weeks of depleted uranium in the 90s.”

Since then, the Balkan heatwave has died down, and with it the intensity. Unemployment continues to rise, wages continue to be withheld as state companies run dry. The nation’s inherent political corruption presents itself in the form of darkened streets from deactivated streetlights,
just like Nevena had told me, the money for which was embezzled by local politicians, and in the notoriously inept state health department putting a hold on all surgeries yesterday because the country’s hospitals are entirely out of blood, what Vedrana calls “the first bloodless period of our history”. No wonder the Minister of Health came back on the flight before mine from his back surgery in Munich.

“I think I’ve figured out what’s wrong with my country,” said Milos over several strong drinks. “This,” he held up his glass of dark green, nearly black liquor and stared it down as if it had committed some horrific sin, “this is Pelinkovac, Serbia’s national drink. I guess that’s the start of the problem: We have a national drink. But that’s not the whole problem, is it? Taste this.” He put it in front of me. I obliged.

Its taste was indescribable. If drinking lemon-scented furniture polish could be more throat-clenchingly bitter, it would still have nothing on this. But this is not my first interaction with this form of substance. I’d been in Eastern Europe years earlier with a group of Western students, and this drink had torn asunder the fragile fabric of our collective reality. “Absinthe…” I mumbled dully, recovering from my flashback of a world undone.

“Pelinokovac,” Milos corrected. “Same active ingredient, wormwood, Pelin, isto. Like France’s Absinthe, but homemade and stronger, hallucinogenic moonshine.”
told him a story from my own Absinthe night those years back, of watching a classmate of mine rocking in the corner, believing that her skin was falling off, but still with the presence of mind to convince another classmate that clothing was a construct of the bourgeoisie intended to oppress the proletariat, this second classmate subsequently stripping to her underwear and declaring herself free. “That sounds about right,” responded Milos. “Think about it. We are tripping all the time. Imagine if your colleagues had more violent tendencies. If Van Gogh had externalized his angst like we do, we might have seen the ethnic cleansing of all Belgians from Benelux instead of the emotional scarring of a prostitute name Rachel.” He laughed at his own high-brow joke, then fell back into the depressive stupor that he’d been in since I’d returned. He’s not the only one the fight’s gone out of.

I was shocked at the madman on the steps stopping where he did, not rising to a frothy rage that started a revolution. As I stood there, that’s what I saw coming. Like Milos, the fight just wasn’t in him. It’s a shame. His words were constructive, Milos’s charm could have inspired a crowd, but their thoughtful rage had proven impotent against the growing fatalism among the thinkers. There are others, though, without the thoughtfulness in their rage, who are once more tapping into the stewing dissatisfaction among the people of Serbia.
Tomislav Nikolic, formerly of the Serbian Radical Party and at the time of this journal the President of the Serbian Parliament, is a terrifying figure. They call Nikolic “Gravedigger”. No, he’s not a pro-wrestler, nor a monster truck driver. The name is meant lovingly, or so I’m told, from his time managing graveyards and other municipal services in his region. But it fills his opposition with an appropriate level of fear. He’s been accused of war crimes in Croatia and, twenty days before the beloved Prime Minister Dindic was murdered, Nikolic gave a speech in which he hinted at the upcoming assassination. The Gravedigger had, at the writing of this journal, his eyes set on a return to prominence. He has since made good on the goal and in 2012 became Serbia’s President.

The Serbian Progressive Party, the extreme offshoot of the right-wing Radicals, is Nikolic’s new party. It’s not just any party. This is a party formed because of a disagreement with a man sitting in The Hague for war crimes who was felt to be too moderate. A party of hooliganism and nationalist violence, whose leadership still calls for a “Greater Serbia” and the restoration of those lands they lost in the 90s. Though I wish I could say that such radical sentiments were fringe, Nikolic proved his power. Inspired by the Tunisians and Egyptians in much the same way as the madman in Novi Sad, Nikolic rallied approximately 100,000 of his supporters on a freezing February day, in itself a feat. But they sat there in rapt
attention, cheering as he voiced his support for Radovan Karadzic against the UN war crimes tribunal people, but obeying his command to refrain from violence. “You will find me here again on the streets!” he promised. We will not be so restrained then, was his silent message. The message was clear to all of us watching: The Gravedigger is coming, and with him a return to the Serbian tradition of violence.

It became obvious that Nikolic was not a passing fad when Serbian mobsters “The Zemun Clan,” some of them former members of Arkan’s Tigers, were arrested in Spain and word got out that Nikolic’s former mentor and leader had taken out a contract on his life with the same men involved in the assassination of Prime Minister Djindjic. Thoughts of a future with The Gravedigger looming over Vojvodina, Milos ordered me a glass of Pelinkovac and another for himself, and we sat in solemn silence.

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Terror Strikes

Terezia is a public maintenance worker, a cleaning lady, in a smaller city in Vojvodina. The state won’t hire anyone as a full-time employee in order to avoid paying their own exuberant employment taxes. It also means they don’t have to pay anything approaching a living wage.
Terezia makes about $3 a day, even in Serbia not subsistence wages. She has not had heating in her home for 27 months. The winters have been harsh and she’s been lucky to survive them. Lucky and blessed to live in a place like Vojvodina, where her neighbors and co-workers ensure she has firewood and food. Her job is to pick up trash near the city center and keep things clean. To make ends meet, she often takes home the metal scraps or interesting odds and ends she finds for resale.

After the snow of winter 2011, Terezia was cleaning the center when she found a beautiful piece of metal, framed in fresh white snow and shimmering in the sun. Jewelry was her first thought. Would she find its owner, perhaps secure a reward? Would she resell it and fetch a high price for whatever was shining so beautifully on the ground? The possibilities were endless, but they all meant that she could eat.

As she picked up her prize, her entire life changed. With dazzling pain that left her shocked and numb, the substances within the trinket mixed and detonated, ripping itself apart and sending pieces of her hand and forearm travelling with the shrapnel around the center. Neighbors heard the explosion and rushed to find Terezia screaming and clutching what was left of her arm. Though in shock, she knew that she would be unable to perform the physical work which provided her even the meager livelihood upon which she subsisted. A local doctor was
one of the first on the scene and administered first aid and worked to keep her conscious.

Terezia will lose her job. No one needs a one-armed cleaning lady. Terezia’s union boss fought to get her rehabilitation costs covered and to have Red Cross provide her with a meal a day as she is recovering, but he was unable to get more than that. No worker’s compensation, no retirement, no continuation of employment. Aside from her neighbors, Terezia is without a safety net.

No public structures or property were damaged in the explosion, no police responded to the scene, and therefore the word “terrorism” has not been applied to the situation. The person who planted the explosive remains unknown, but what is known is that this was not just some hooligan. The device itself was modeled on the “dolly bombs” used by Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan, the small devices intended to look like children’s toys in order to shock and awe the populace when their younger generation was maimed in the conflict. The attacker was almost certainly former military, as above a certain age it’s a very small percentage of the male population who doesn’t fall into that category and the entire Yugoslav army having been Soviet-trained throughout its formation and until Tito’s split with. It is unknown if the ethnic Hungarian Terezia, or the cleaning crew made up of largely non-Serb workers, was targeted by nationalist terror, or if this was merely an act of incitement to tear apart a peaceful, unified multi-
ethnic city. What is clear is that this situation is moving, if slowly, from discussion to conflict.

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Mi <3 Vojvodinu

Back in Subotica for a coffee with the leaders of a newly formed political party, the most recent attempt at consolidating the regional parties into one political powerhouse, I see an interesting phenomenon begin to grow. Passing by the beautiful Hapsburg city hall, I see two young children ride up on a single bike, the larger pedaling, the smaller riding the handlebars and basket like an actual seat. They stop quickly next to the building, pull out a sheet of cardboard and a can, and 15 seconds later are back on the bike, leaving no evidence of their presence but this:

![MI ❤ VOJVODINU](image)

It’s a beautiful expression, and I’m immediately taken with it. Throughout the Balkans, especially Serbia, there is endless anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-UN, anti-Communist, anti-Fascist and anti-person graffiti. Anti, Anti, Anti,
negativity everywhere, or ownership, as with Kosovo, but I have never before seen, aside from the municipally-sanctioned mural work in US inner cities, the phenomenon of uplifting graffiti. Graffiti itself is embraced as a rebellious act and rebellious art form, but to use it for the purpose of hope, of brotherhood, of love? This is new.

Walking on, I’m amazed at how prolific those children have been. As I make my way around the square, I see it along the walls another 3 times. They’ve been wonderfully respectful of the beautiful ceramic work on many of the city’s walls, choosing instead to spray the easily repaired stucco and cement. Down the main street, by the theater, I see it again, this time with an even more incredible element: two police officers smirking at the childish rebellion as the kids ride on.

A land known in modern times for civil repression, for corruption and brutality, two state agents are not simply turning a blind eye but openly embracing the message. What gives? I asked the politicos about it, but, as politicians, they seem to wholly miss the point, failing to embrace the grassroots feeling of regional pride and instead ignoring the act as “childish” and “counterproductive”. With only these self-interested party hacks interested in leading, it’s no surprise the people grow so disillusioned with politics, but this new expression seems to herald a glorious dawn for Vojvodina’s politics.
Days later, back in Novi Sad, I see it has spread further, this regional pride, and I witness one of the vandals in action. Not being known for self-preservation, it doesn’t occur to me that interrupting a vandal might be hazardous to my health, but this one is more than happy to talk.

“I love my land. I love my friends. I love my people,” she begins, then switches selves. “We love our food. We love our music. We love our architecture. We love all these things about Vojvodina, but we forget to love ourselves. We submit ourselves to whoever seeks to rule us, to steal from us, but we have so much to be proud of, so much to love about ourselves. We love Vojvodina, and we must remember this.”

I identified myself as a writer and gave her my business card, did not ask her name. “If there’s anything I can do, contact me.”

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If there’s anything I can do...

A Serbian protest needs nothing from an American, even an honorary Lala. A local movement is not local once the US gets involved, especially in a country so recently bombed by NATO. People cease to believe it’s anything but a Western puppet conspiracy fighting another proxy
war. The spraypainter knew this. It was a no-risk offer, “if there’s anything I can do, contact me.” But contact me she did. I thought she’d call, if anything, but I got placed on her “revolutionary listserv” and started getting e-mails that night.

**Subject:** The World Comes Apart.

**Friends,**

Before it was the Middle East, it was Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan overthrew their President, Georgia fell apart, Kazakhstan’s government is now extending emergency powers and simply asking for revolution. The world is interconnected. None of these events are independent from each other, or from us.

With the recent events in Tunisia, Lebanon and Egypt, seemingly spreading to Jordan, Algeria and the ‘stans, it is just a matter of time before an outbreak of unrest reaches us in Vojvodina. We saw what destruction a mere Gay Pride Parade was capable of sparking this summer. I think we’ve found a way not just to prevent violence, but to turn whatever is coming to Serbia into something beautiful.

Mi <3 Vojvodinu. I’m attaching a template for a stencil for you. If we can preempt whatever hateful words will be coming in the next month or so and instead create an atmosphere of goodwill with these on every street corner, we can create a sense of regional pride that could, in time, get us the support needed for a referendum for full autonomy. In the meantime, it will be a reminder not just of why we love Vojvodina, but also that Vojvodina is not a prize to be coveted (a la Kosovo Je Srbija) but a treasure to be protected and loved by Serbia.

Signs are up in Subotica, in Novi Sad. We’re seeing handwritten ones in Zrenjanin and stenciled “Volem Vojvodinu” in Sombor. It’s blossoming beyond our clique. We must build it amongst our friends. Let it blossom through our
families and neighbors. Let it grow and with it let our nation grow. But it must start with this, the seed.

To love, to food, to family, to peace.

Sosa

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Sosa

I still don’t know her name. 3 weeks of blast e-mails, this movement is blowing up (non-violently, of course), and this Sosa finally sent me a personalized message. It was simple.

Subject: You Can Help Now.
Message:

Mr. Writer,

You said “if there is anything I can do, contact me.” There is now something you can do. Meet with me. Remember where we met? I will meet you there. There is a bar halfway down the street. We will go there to talk. See you on Friday? 15:00.

Sosa.

“Have any of you ever heard of a woman named Sosa? She wouldn’t give me a last name” I asked the Daughters. It was obviously the funniest question they’d ever been asked. They were on the floor.

“Eeeh, ja sam Sosa,” said Izzy, curiously.

“Ja sam Sosa isto!” squealed Vedrana. I am Sosa too.

“i ja sam Sosa!” cried Ana.

Soon it was a cacophony of laughter and Slavic. “We’re all Sosas here. Well, not you. You’re a Lala, sort
of.” More laughter. “Sosa is his female counterpart. You’ve found one of our Spartacuses. The Daughters of Vojvodina don’t go far enough for some people. Some of our members left because we weren’t pushing for Independence, just autonomy. They don’t refer to one another by name. They’re all Sosa. They want the same thing we want, and on the same terms, they just want a little bit more. They’re good devojke.” Her use of devojke, meaning girls, instead of the word for women, was interesting. A small stab at their naïveté?

“So is it safe for me to meet her? I mean them... I mean, this one, this Sosa, she should be ok? And you would be ok with it?”

“We talk to the Sosas. They know what we’re up to. We’d rather not know what they’re doing. There’s love between us. Just be careful. The same people who don’t approve of us really hate them.”

I take a walk with Izzy after dinner. The full moon against the Orthodox church is breathtaking, the white light giving her a surreally angelic cast, the words coming out as smoke in the frosty air. “I meant it before, when I first spoke up. I am Sosa. Not the Sosa you were talking to, but I’m one of them. I was pretty sure that’s been clear from the first time I met you, autonomy’s not all I’m in it for. But I have to be realistic: autonomy’s what I’ll be lucky to get. All that talk of ‘Vojvodina must be free’ that I gave you, I wish I still had that idealism, and it’s why I support
and love the Sosas, call myself one. You can’t find a middle ground without the fringe. They’re necessary, they’re beautiful, I envy them. I don’t tell the rest of the women, but I want you to know so that you can know this: they’re not scary. They’re us. They are your family as we are, and they need your help, too. If we don’t win, it’s going to fall to them.”

I sleep little and catch an early bus to Novi Sad. It’s not too far, but the Serbian transit system is dependably undependable. There’s a single highway that connects most of the country, and for much of it there is one lane in each direction. Translation: One accident (certainly fatal in a Yugo, simply inconvenient in a bus) can disrupt the country for hours, and the Serbs are notoriously bad drivers. After 50 minutes or so on the bus, past the massive sugar factory, past endless fields of grain in this plain’s legendary soil, we arrive uneventfully at the main bus station. While it’s fortunate that we made it, I regret leaving myself this much time. The walk through the casino district and the fish market took not nearly as long as expected, and after three cups of coffee at three different cafes around the city center only wasted two hours of my time, I started my trek across the river.

Over the Danube, the bridge begins to sway and Nevena’s discussion of the NATO bombing comes to mind. It’s an incredibly strong wind, but I avoid plunging to the polluted brown depths below and I begin to walk
along the road that skirts the fortress. The fortress walls, despite the cold, are spotted with beautiful yellow flowers, like bright shrapnel from the centuries-old Hapsburg-yellow overpass above. After about 45 minutes up the cobblestones, I find the spot where I’d met Sosa weeks before.

She had the renegade beauty of the young radical. Wide, curious brown eyes and full lips that held a frown intensely but broke into a very reassuring toothy smile. Long wavy brown hair, almost curly. She was unkempt but not slovenly with a dark green bomber jacket over her black turtleneck and a wooden charm necklace overtop.

I had enough Serbian understanding to translate the madman on the street, so I tried to meet her, linguistically as geographically, on her own turf. “Cao, Sosa,” I started.

“Hello, Mr. Writer,” she responded.

“Zovite me Zek.”

“I know your name, and your nickname, from your e-mails, but to me, you are Mr. Writer as to you I am Sosa, like my sisters.”

I give up on speaking her language. She’s chosen mine, and she’s in charge here. “I’m here; I’m at your service. How can I help you?”

“We help each other. Sosa has a story that she needs the world to hear. You’re a writer and need a story to write, so write ours. Get our story out. We don’t know how long it will be before the strife hits Serbia, but we
know that before it does, many of us will be in jail or dead. The world needs to know that we exist, that this government is not of our making and we need help.”

“The world will want to know what you’re fighting for.”

“We do not fight. What we are working for, I told you when we first met. For family, friends, land, food, art and people.”

“How many people know this? How many see this as a divisive and potentially violent conflict? Do your countrymen support you?”

“We are not hippies or childish idealists. Certainly, we had many among our ranks at the beginning. Fair-weather Friends, those activists. Hundreds have copped out of the movement, supportive of our cause but without the spine to stand up for it. Some left because they misunderstood. Some left out of fear. My best friend left us because she wanted unity, not division, and felt that we would be a divisive force. She, her family, her friends, and much of my family believed that sweeping the issue under the rug, not discussing it, just being a part of a happy unified Serbia would be the best solution. It’s what we’ve always done, as a people, as a nation, and it worked for us for centuries. But it’s not working today. We have lost what we had that made it work for so long. We have lost ownership of our fields and factories, we have lost the right to choose how we spend what little income we make.
Without our autonomy, we will lose ourselves. This is where the West comes in. There are many of us on the ground, but if those activists, those hundreds we lost to fear and lack of faith, if they knew we had Western support, they’d be back on the streets with us, pretending they never left.”

She describes the situation as Josiah Harlan, American adventurer and freedom fighter in Afghanistan, described the British invaders there in 1839, that while other responsible powers and empires had “conquer[ed] a dominion by controlling the political parties of a state,” the British empire was crushing, “no condition of submission short of absolute servility, and the abolition of their national identity, could satisfy the British in their projected conquest of Afghanistan [sic]”. That was a reason to fight in Afghanistan, in India, throughout the colonial world. There’s little more valid reason to fight than crushing domination. And yet.

“Will the world understand a revolution that is not fought?”

“The world understood Martin Luther King, they understood Gandhi, they understood the self-immolation of Tunisia. The world may seem a place that glorifies pain and violence and fighting, but humanity respects and understands peace.”
“Is graffiti your only method? How else does Sosa get her message out? And is property destruction the best method?”

“There’s a quote from the world’s preeminent graffiti artist, Banksy. Something along the lines of ‘the people who truly deface our neighborhoods are the companies that scrawl giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you’re never allowed to answer back. Well, they started the fight, and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back.’ The extremists and politicians and hooligans of Serbia, they have the podium, the billboards, they have the bullhorn and the bullwhip, and they use their tools to spread messages of hate and of oppression and inspire their followers to violence and rage. We’re taking back the walls, at least as a first step.”

“Not all the Sosas are as eloquent and multilingual as you, are they?”

“Elocuence is relative. To you, I’m eloquent. To the average citizen, I use words that are too big and a sentence structure too complex. I’m too Western for most of my countrymen, but I am important in that I can talk to you. There are others who can communicate with the masses. Sosa could be anyone. Sosa believes in freedom and in Vojvodina. She needn’t be educated or multilingual, she
can be fat or thin, young or old, though she is almost certainly poor…”

“I’ve asked this of others in the past. Is independence worth the destruction of your homeland?”

“Absolutely not. This is the reason for the heart. *Mi <3 Vojvodina*. We heart Vojvodina. I do not fight for Vojvodina. I do not fight you over Vojvodina. I do not hate Serbia. I do not propose independence in my graffiti or in my conversation. I would be happy with autonomy. I heart Vojvodina and my countrymen will as well.”

“What do you hope my story will achieve?”

“Let them know we were here. We are nameless, we are faceless, we are merely another post-communist tragedy, but we are your sisters. We yearn for freedom as your parents and grandparents did when they set out for America. Perhaps, if you write well enough, they’ll get to know us while we’re still here, before it’s too late.”

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**Bojan**

“He doesn’t look like a war criminal…”

“What does a War Criminal look like?”

“Y’know, angry, dead inside, crazy eyes… This guy looks like a folk singer or a farmer…”
I wish I were merely fabricating this conversation to build a straw man of ineptitude on human rights issues. The lesson of “the war criminal next door” has been taught and learned time and again, most recently with the Auschwitz guard living undetected for 50 years in middle America, discovered and nearly extradited in 2014. But this was an actual quote from a very intelligent colleague, and the sentiment was echoed throughout friends and family following the arrest of 16-year war-crimes fugitive Ratko Mladic, leader of the Srebrenica massacre.

“Why don’t you get out of here for a little bit?” suggested Natasha. It was the anniversary of the start of NATO’s bombing of Serbia, and the anti-Western rhetoric was in full swing. I’d seen the danger of anti-American protests up close enough times to have lost that morbid curiosity that had in the past kept me around just to watch. I agreed quickly and she drove me to the train station. I got to the station with no concept of where I was going. I stood in front of the schedule for three minutes mulling my options. I just got back from monitoring Bosnia’s elections, that’d be boring to do again. Zagreb? Overpriced and filled with Brits. Budapest? Beautiful, but it’s so been done. Bucharest? Never Again! Moscow? I’d need a visa. I walked up to the counter. “One sleeping car to... uhm... Kiev?” I said in broken Serbian. $50 for a sleeping car to Ukraine, and only a 20 minute wait? It was meant to be.
On the train to Kiev, Ukraine, from Novi Sad, Serbia, I learned the lesson of the war criminal next door firsthand. As the vast curly-haired Russian babushka guided me to my train car, I was disappointed to find there were three beds per room, and a drunken Slav had already taken the bottom bunk. I guess that’s what $50 for a 38-hour train ride gets you. We shook hands, he raised a glass to me, drunkenly screamed a Serbian “Zdralavo ee jeevalee!” (I can only assume it was meant to be “hello and cheers!”) chugged down the contents and collapsed back onto his pillow. As I monkeyed my way to the top bunk, an even more disappointed Russian appeared in the doorway. He introduced himself as Kolya. Seeing us shake hands, the Serb sat up, poured two extra glasses of his homemade liquor, pointed to himself and declared “Ja Bojan!” and lifted his glass to us.

An American should never try to drink the hard stuff with a Russian and a Serb. We can’t compete, and we can’t cop out. You see, Slavs don’t understand the word “no.” “Ne” and “Nyet” don’t work either when it comes to booze. Believe me, I tried. After we’d shared three cups, my language skills improving with every sip, Bojan brought out the homemade bread and sausage. I’d been thinking the entire time “make sure you’re still sober enough not to have anyone jack your stuff,” later recalling that I didn’t really have any stuff to jack. Food will help me retain some level of sobriety. “Moras da jedes!” slurred
the volume-control-challenged Bojan. “If you drink, you must eat!” he wisely suggested and forced fresh bread and home-made sausage into my cup-less hand.

After hours of tri-lingual humor and camaraderie, the conversation subtly turned from coffee to politics. Foolishly, after being engaged on the advice of Seselj, a radical Serb on trial in The Hague, I disparaged the memory of Arkan, the most atrocious of Balkan villains. Arkan, who led a paramilitary tank unit called The Tigers known for the rape of hundreds and the murder of thousands. It turns out, our drunken bunkmate had served under the notorious Arkan and took it upon himself to defend his honor.

“Arkan nije bio los covek! Arkan je voleo svoju zemlju! Osmanlije ne vole nista!” lectured Bojan in a serious slur. Arkan is merely a man who loves his land, whereas the Muslims love nothing. This all started with a discussion of coffee. I needed to sober up fast. With that much moonshine in me, it wasn’t going to happen. The Russian and I managed to calm down Bojan enough that he returned to his bunk, but continued on a drunken monologue about his beloved boss who was only trying to save the dignity and integrity of Serbia from those damned Turks. Or Ottomans. Or Muslims. Or Islamists. It was a long enough monologue that he managed to use all of them at least once to describe the same group of people, namely Bosnians. After a few minutes, though, he lost his
train of thought, and with it his vitriol, and with another
drink we returned to our previous camaraderie, and I kept
enough wits about me to never bring up Yugoslav politics
again.

As we crossed into Ukraine, it seemed like the
entire Soviet military was piling into the train. As row
after row of scowling Soviets with German Shepherds
filed past, a pair of very cute Ukrainian twins in
camouflage entered our cabin to request my passport. I
happily obliged, handing, to my surprise, one passport to
each of them, at the same time using only one hand. I
didn’t remember having two passports, though at this
point I didn’t remember how I got on the train. This is
about the last thing I recall before the terror of being
shaken awake by the jovial, balding pudge of Bojan yelling
“Kiev! Kiev!”

I rushed out of the train, nearly forgetting my bag,
which my new war criminal acquaintance carried off the
train to me. Kolya waved goodbye from within the train,
but Bojan actually led me off the train and to a taxi,
arranging my ride to a hostel he knew well. What a
friendly mass murderer…

Ratko Mladic, the most wanted man in Europe, the
second-most heinous Balkan war criminal, only after the
now-deceased Arkan himself, was apprehended a few
months later in northern Serbia. He’d been on the lam for
15 years. He was thought to be isolated in a small
apartment in Belgrade the year prior. A five-million-dollar bounty had long been offered for information on his whereabouts. Yet it was only in late 2011, far from the Serbian capital, that he was finally arrested at his home, under the assumed identity of Milorad Komadic. Mladic was found in the Bosnian Serb village of Lazarevo, a self-contained unit within Vojvodina, inhabited by some of Mladic’s family members.

“How could the people of Vojvodina have been fooled by such a flimsy disguise?” I hear asked. “They must have supported his actions, the people must have known and simply wished to keep him from justice.” Had I not been drunk and loose-lipped on my way to Ukraine, I’d never have known that I was traveling, drinking and laughing with a war criminal. Had my traveling companion not been quite so drunk, he might not have admitted so openly his allegiance and his deeds. Had he known he were a wanted fugitive, Bojan could easily have hidden the fact. In Mladic’s case, with government reports coming out that he had been located in Belgrade and with the protection of his quiet supporters in Lazarevo, what neighbor would have thought to ask? The tragedy of the arrest is that it is not simply his supporters within the Bosnian Serb village who will be tarred by the brush of war crimes.
Western double-dealing and two-timing a century ago caused countless ethnic struggles. For the mish-mosh of sovereignty concerns and penal backstabbing at the 1920 Treaty of Trianon\textsuperscript{25}, the dominant Western powers of the United States, France and Britain deserve the blame for the spread of Communism and authoritarianism throughout Eastern Europe in the 20th century, and millions dead and displaced. As well-publicized as the Treaty of Versailles is, almost equally is the Treaty of Trianon ignored. While Versailles, created by those same dominant powers, bankrupted Germany and in its disempowerment led directly to the rise of Nazism and World War II, Trianon enacted similar but subtly more damaging vengeance upon the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Unfortunately, Trianon is the rallying cry of right-wing Hungarian ethnonationalists who believe that they were unfairly punished after World War I and that they should still rule all the lands of what they refer to today as “Greater Hungary”. This ethnic argument, however, is not
simply unimportant and factually inaccurate, it is counter-productive: It undermines attention by otherwise thoughtful people to the real problems of Trianon. By breaking up long-established trade routes, they ensured poverty among the masses. By over-emphasizing ethnic nationalism, they ensured the rise of patriotic ethnic states with vengeance in mind. By making deals with the devil and destabilizing the region, they left a power vacuum and a desire in the now-impoverished populace for a new system, and the appeal of a communist system to a starving, unemployed worker should be obvious. Without Trianon, admittedly, Slovaks and Croats and half of Romanians would have remained under Hungarian rule, but this freed status didn’t even prevent each and all of these groups from joining the Germans, Austrians and Hungarians in the commission of horrific crimes under the Nazi banner in WWII.

All of this could have been avoided had the American establishment respected the prophetic Coolidge Report they had commissioned. Yet today, nearly a century later, the US diplomatic establishment wants nothing to do with the solution. Our internationally-charged institutions would rather see a slow and silent genocide, or a bloody war in which they can once more play the hero, than to

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xxvii The empire being led as it was not from Budapest but from Vienna, the Hungarians were at best a distant junior partner to the Austrians.
use their well-developed diplomatic leverage to assist in making things right.

I learned this firsthand when I traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with the staff of Congress’s most powerful post-Soviet diplomatic arm, the Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the United States’ wing of the OSCE, widely recognized, as I came to learn, as the diplomatic face of NATO. I came on behalf of the Daughters of Vojvodina to discuss their issues with an old associate of mine, just a sit-down in his cubicle in a House of Representatives office building. What I got, however, was ambushed.

After being kept waiting for 45 minutes in a vast, intimidating waiting room, a woman behind a big mahogany desk in the back of the room told me my associate had to cancel, but that he’d arranged for me to meet with some of his co-workers. Already off balance from that, I was surprised to enter a large conference room facing a line of former ambassadors and bureaucrats seated opposite me at a table. After the formalities of introductions and offering drink, I was asked to present the group’s case, the case for autonomy, as though this were an actual Congressional hearing. This would be no friendly conversation among former colleagues. After years in the notoriously aggressive Balkans, this was one of the most hostile environments I’d ever experienced.
I hadn’t gotten far in explaining the situation before the Commission’s Legal Counsel, informed me that “autonomy” was not the word of the day. “They need to shit or get off the pot,” she told me, as I tried not to gawk. “Autonomy is what the Kosovars wanted,” she continued. And, though I regretfully restrained myself from making the point, imagine what tragedies could have been averted had they gotten it. Imagine if international pressure had mounted on Yugoslavia to grant increased autonomy to its provinces. It’s possible that the ethnic nationalists could have been preempted and the entire breakup, which started from a town hall meeting in Kosovo in 1991, could have been avoided.

Bob, the Commission’s Policy Advisor, who has served the OSCE mission to Kosovo, Sandzak and Vojvodina, continued to refer to the regular and increasingly ethnically-charged and politically sanctioned violence as “individual instances,” making involvement infeasible, whereas if it were institutional, maybe there’d be something they could do. Of course, none of the nationalist political speeches or targeted attacks, not even the grenade thrown into the Vojvodinian Hungarian leader’s home, is sufficient proof.

“What gives you the authority to speak on behalf of Vojvodina?” asked the experienced female Ambassador from the far left of the table. Though I’ve forgotten her name, I’ll never forget the tone. This was a question for
which I was actually prepared, having been confronted similarly by the blogger known as Fist-Swinging Feminist a few months earlier. “Absolutely nothing, aside from luck and fate,” I responded, perhaps overly dismissive. “I did not seek these women out. We met by chance, during the course of my US State Department-funded research, but I do not seek to profit off of them, and I do not purport to speak on behalf of all of Vojvodina.”

“Anthropologist Nancy Shephard Hughes called on her colleagues in the field to get involved with the communities and struggles they were documenting, not to sit on the sidelines. I’m no anthropologist, but I came to the Balkans on a research grant, and while the rest of my colleagues may have been content to watch and document, unaffected, as tragedy unfolded around them, I could not in good conscience stay uninvolved when my nation’s policies are so much to blame and when I could personally make a difference.” This answer did not sway my inquisitors.

After a half-hour of this interrogation, the Ambassador excused herself as though I’d wasted her time, and shortly thereafter most of the disinterested diplomats followed suit. The Commission’s Legal Counsel had not intended to offend or be quite so brusque as she came across. She followed up the meeting with an e-mail regarding one of my points and a mistake I had made. It was not for her to decide to help or to hinder, she
explained kindly. The meeting’s outcome had been decided before it started, its only purpose to dissuade me from further involving myself with Vojvodina. In fact, inaction and distance on human rights issues in Vojvodina had been State Department and CSCE policy for at least five years at that point. Culling through the Wikileaks database of leaked diplomatic cables, mildly dismissive references to Vojvodina’s need for help against the rising tide of Serbian nationalism have been coming in since 2006, with other cables showing the General Affairs and External Relations Council of the European Union ignoring them since at least 2004. Cables even show an in-depth understanding of the use of extremism and neo-Nazism by Serb leaders to undermine multiculturality in places like Novi Sad and refer to Vojvodinian politics as “Poor Man’s Entertainment”.26

Their perspective is understandable, though their approach may have been ugly. Involvement requires effort, time, and sometimes resources, and involvement in the Balkans is an especially scary prospect based on recent history. But the people of Vojvodina are not asking for any expenditure of capital or force, not in 2006, not when I came to that meeting in 2011, and not today. That would be counterproductive. All that they ask is recognition: when the US plays politics in the Balkans, they should not forget about Vojvodina. Vojvodina is within Serbia, but the mistake of categorizing Vojvodina as Serbia has had
devastating effects on US power and policy in the region. Include them in calculations and negotiations; remember them in diplomacy throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Why would we discount a ready and willing ally?

Perhaps the answer is laziness. Serbia, having learned that no Western intervention comes to stop an ethnic cleansing that can’t generate media attention, is not the first to employ the technique of what Nevena termed a cultural genocide. In his book *Highlanders*, Yo’av Karny describes how slower, more gradual ethnic cleansings were carried out by Russia against the native tribes of the Caucasus mountains, tribes like the Circassians, whose bravery and beauty were once the stuff of Western legend, yet who are all but unknown and unheard of today: “And so, the descendants of the [Circassian] chief have been reduced to a harmless minority, performing exotic dances on public holidays.”²⁷ Is this what Vojvodina’s future has in store? It seems that, following three failed genocides in the last century, Serbia is taking a lesson from history: Take it slow and the genocide almost commits itself.

Perhaps it’s a matter of skewed priorities, a culture of sensationalism of the inevitable and negligence of the alterable. The US State Department and many of America’s non-conventional diplomatic channels are deeply concerned about the tiny island of Tuvalu that will no longer exist in 50 years due to rising sea levels from global warming, a near-unavoidable fate.²⁸ Research is
heavily funded there and the plight is highly publicized by officials. Yet not a wink of sleep is lost over the cultures and peoples whose oppression is largely the fault of ill-conceived American diplomatic policies, and who also may disappear in the same amount of time, but from issues that simple diplomacy could easily alter and avoid.

What seems more likely the answer, however, is a lack of imagination on the part of US diplomats. To them, fixed sovereignty is binary: you are or you are not. Just as one cannot be “a little bit pregnant,” a nation cannot be “a little bit sovereign”, not in the black and white world of non-academic international relations. The right of a people to self-determination is their sovereignty. Whether this is in the form of a state or a self-governing region, a claim for self-determination comes from within, or at least impacts, the borders of another state. Yet the only recognized representative of a group is their government, and since Slobodan Milosevic dissolved Vojvodina’s government in 1988, and subsequently replaced the regional media with his own loyalists, there has been no one to speak for Vojvodina but their Serbian oppressors.

In 1989 Serbia’s leader, Slobodan Milosevic, the same leader who started the wars in Bosnia and Croatia and moved against Slovenia in the last decade, stripped Kosovo of the constitutional autonomy its people enjoyed, thus denying them their right to speak their language, run their schools, shape their daily lives. For years, Kosovars
struggled peacefully to get their rights back. When President Milosevic sent his troops and police to crush them, the struggle grew violent.29

So spoke Bill Clinton as he authorized the bombing of Serbia and Vojvodina in 1999. That bombing of which Nevena spoke that took out her bridge. 78 days of bombings in a country the size of Kentucky. The situation sounds similar, doesn’t it? Interesting that when Milosevic “stripped” the multiethnic province of Vojvodina “of the constitutional autonomy its people enjoyed,” a people with a longer history of autonomy and a stronger case for independence, a people who “struggled peacefully to get their rights back,” Clinton proceeded to bomb Milosevic’s victims in the ensuing conflict, strengthening Milosevic’s hold on Vojvodina.

It is noble of Nevena and Milos to give the US a free pass, especially in light of our own genocidal, ethnically cleansed history. It is noble of their friends and countrymen to show us the love we do not deserve for our crimes in the Balkan region, and beyond. We cannot give ourselves the same pass. And if we cannot be shamed into reform, then let us be incentivized.

The most famous modern realist, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, declared “America has no permanent friends or enemies. America only has interests.”30 Yet US foreign policies undermine those same “American interests”. The West, in its most recent
incarnation as NATO, has ignored, and at times attacked, a willing ally in a hostile land for lack of imagination. Vojvodina is merely a singular example of a regular practice by Western diplomats who refuse to act in similar cases to aid allies in equally obscure but strategically vital and culturally-allied locations as Nagorno-Karabakh, Tibet\textsuperscript{31} or Kurdistan. This is certainly not caused by strict adherence to realist scripture.

The Daughters of Vojvodina, the Sosas, these are tight-knit organizations with steadily growing memberships, but they are not alone in their cause. Many of these stories are from women who have never even heard of the Daughters. A few are members of smaller, more public Independence Parties but are finding no success in Serb-controlled mainstream politics. The only movements gaining mainstream political traction are the Autonomist Parties, with massive local support, a few seats in Serbian parliament, as well as the support of several popular regional musicians and actors. The Autonomist Parties have also received the aforementioned international backing. But the job is not getting done, and every day wasted on Parliamentary proceedings and obedience lends further legitimacy to a corrupt occupying regime.

It’s not too late. The last chapter has yet to be written on Vojvodina.
This is the West’s responsibility. By playing Great Power politics with creative cartography, Woodrow Wilson starved, enslaved and forcefully relocated millions. A century of ethnic strife and war crimes in this peaceful region is on him, and therefore on the United States, as well as the European allies who supported and assisted in these treacherous treaties. It would take so little to make it right, to quietly maneuver and assist through diplomatic channels, but without headlines and heroism, it is not worth the CSCE’s time. This is unacceptable. As much as The Commission’s Legal Counsel and the Ambassador would like to ignore their pleas, it is their moral imperative to make right a century of oppression that their institutional forebears thrust upon Vojvodina. These bureaucrats themselves are in the position of greatest power to make the difference. It is a choice not to.

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International Response

Not everyone takes the OSCE’s approach. At a very fortuitous meeting with the Ambassador of Montenegro Miodrag Vlahovic following my return to the US in 2009, I had the opportunity to ask him “How did Montenegro execute a ‘velvet divorce’ from Serbia, removing their only access to the sea, without inciting another civil war? And
why hasn’t Vojvodina, with a seemingly greater claim to independence, been able to do the same? What would you suggest to the people of Vojvodina who wish to follow your example?”

“It is a very different situation, Vojvodina and Montenegro, but there are many similarities,” he responded. “Vojvodina is the center of culture for Serbia, for Yugoslavia, too. The finest agriculture, as well. Breadbasket, I think you call it? However, much like Crna Gora’s Adriatic access, Serbia has grown dependent on what is not theirs, in this case Vojvodina’s agriculture. I don’t think Vojvodina will be able to claim independence. Certainly not without war. However, what Vojvodina has always had, and what Serbia absolutely must return to them, is their autonomy. 100%.”

Montenegro is not the only nation with such a stance. In a 2001 speech by the Hungarian Ambassador to the United States, Géza Jeszenszky, he too opined on the importance of autonomy. Discussing all the aforementioned atrocities gone past, by all sides, his primary premise was “The task we are all deeply interested in: how to make this province happy and prosperous again? Hungary is vitally interested in establishing stability, security, market reforms and democratic structures in the Balkans,” followed by a list of

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xxvii Montenegro’s native name

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Hungarian efforts in that struggle. His answer to that “how?”:

Genuine democracy in Serbia should be built on the local communities that played such an important role in the recent changes. It is in this framework that Serbia’s national minorities, including Hungarians living in Vojvodina, should be given a new deal. That will require appropriate legal arrangements pertaining to their status. Hungary’s attitude to the problem of the Vojvodina is very clear: it wants close, warm relations with all the neighbors, but there is one precondition: that cannot take place over the heads of the local Hungarians, to their detriment. Such a policy follows from the common history - but it is also a constitutional obligation (since 1989)… Already hundred years ago that was proposed in the Hapsburg Monarchy under the term ‘cultural autonomy’.

Hungary’s approach, however, is backed by horribly counter-productive policies. The administration has offered Hungarian citizenship to all ethnic Hungarians in former Hapsburg lands, lands such as Vojvodina. In so doing, they have become an unintentional ally in the cultural and ethnic cleansing of Vojvodina. The demographic shifts in Vojvodina have advanced rapidly since the implementation of this policy. It’s not merely a self-serving method of combatting what Hungarian nationalists see as the threat of rising “Gypsy” populations. The nationalist Hungarian administration honestly believes that they are doing their ethnic brethren
a great service, but their approach is as short-sighted as Wilson’s. Other national leaders, however, recognize the delicateness of the situation and lend much needed vocal support without detrimental policies.

At 1:15pm on November 6, 2011 in Graz, Austria, former head of Kosovo Azem Vllasi, the man Milosevic ousted while he was replacing Kosovo’s and Vojvodina’s governments with his puppets, looked me in the eye, smiled, and declared “Bogu Fala Sto Sam Lala.” Thank God I’m a Lala, spoken in the Vojvodinian dialect of the Serbo-Croatian language. We were at a conference discussing the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and I was wearing my autonomist loyalties quite literally on my sleeve, in a shirt that said “Volem Vojvodinu,” the precursor to the Sosas’ Ja <3 Vojvodinu. Kosovo, with all the ethnic hatreds that divide its Albanians and Serbs, recognizes the difference between Serbia and Vojvodina. This is a distinction that they could easily not make after the atrocities in which Vojvodina has been implicated with its puppet regime’s subservience to Serbia, a distinction that the West certainly didn’t make when it involved itself in the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo and bombed Novi Sad in 1999.

“Bogu Fala Sto Sam Lala.” The Dutch, British, Scandinavian and Austrian representatives who’ve been on the ground for a decade didn’t know what it means, but Mr. Vllasi was a good start.
Beyond these explicit expressions by foreign
governments, there are many other foreign players giving
either suggested or implicit support to the movement. The
most widely known is the Canadian Postal Service’s
labeling of Vojvodina as its own separate country, which
many in Serbia have construed as implicit support for
independence. In 2004, the US State Department released a
Human Rights Report detailing “an upsurge in vandalism
and violence against minority ethnic and religious groups
in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina,” though
not going so far as to take a stance on the issue. Another
US group, though, the American Hungarian Federation, in
March 2005 “called on the Serbian government to
guarantee the autonomy of Vojvodina” and months later
discussed their fears of a “new Kosovo.”

This is not an ethnic issue. This is a multi-ethnic,
multi-religious movement based on concepts of self-
determination and freedom. Almost 60% of those involved
in the Daughters of Vojvodina or the Sosas are ethnically
Serbian, and several others are part-Serbian. A mix of
Hungarians, Croats, Germans, and Poles make up the
remaining third of the movement. The support exists
within Serbia, and Vojvodina does not stand alone outside
of Serbia either, nor do these issues stand unnoticed. There
is support for autonomy, and if Serbia does not acquiesce,
soon enough the pressure will be on for full independence.
Personal Backlash

Coming in to the Republic of Georgia by air from Kiev, after my trip with Bojan the Tiger, on descent Tbilisi starts out looking like a Pac-Man level, with thick, foggy red lines and bright lights and cars moving like the red and green and yellow ghost thingies. Then we get closer down into the suburban housing, an unholy union of Stalinist architecture and a ramshackle gypsy village. We then land in front of the enormous golden palatial house of worship immediately beside the airport, my view interrupted only by the enormous glass-nosed military propeller-planes and the police cars greeting us on the ground. It is a thing of ill-conceived beauty, modern and ancient, gold and neon shining and glowing together, a fantastic glorious accident. The taxi drove 150km/hr down a carless neon-lit three-lane highway named after George W. Bush, past the Georgian oil and gas company, a modern blue and grey steel palace, toward a glittering eiffel-ized Space Needle on a mountain. Glittering in the deep darkness of midnight, sparkling like Las Vegas, for no reason but conspicuous consumption and the all-important “because we can.”

The driver U-turned and veered off onto side roads, almost hitting a skinny, glazed-eyed, greasy-haired
Professor-Snape-look-alike walking down the street carrying a painting, zooming past him toward a glowing fountain beneath an enormous golden glowing church. He maneuvered through an unpaved alley of broke-down autos and dilapidated housefronts. I arrived at my destination, a hostel where I slept in decidedly-recently-used camouflage military-grade sleeping bags to ward off the freezing cold, under an elaborately painted ceiling with a beautiful antique crystal and gold chandelier. After climbing the Caucasus the following morning, I met with my contact who was to take me to Gori, Stalin’s birthplace and site of much fighting in the 2008 conflict with Russia.

I’ve had some legitimately surreal moments in my life, but few can compare to the truly globalized feeling of drinking Turkish coffee in Josef Stalin’s hometown in the Caucasus and receiving alerts on my American BlackBerry that my Facebook account was receiving threatening messages written in Serbian. My involvement in the situation in Vojvodina had not gone unnoticed. “Jebem te usta mali pederu!” which translates quite unpublishably. That message was the start of a very scary day.

"You should kill yourself ...go away!!" was the next one, gentler but still a surprise, about three minutes after the first.

A third accused me of being a Nazi and a Croat. They cited my research in Croatia, listed publicly online by the
university through which my grant was carried out, as proof of Nazi Croat sympathies. I was impressed and terrified by their research skills, especially given the bloody threats that came next, and the non-consensual promises made regarding my ability to sit down that followed those. Within an hour, there were more than a dozen threats of physical harm, a few death threats, and a number of simple, if jarring, requests that I remove myself from the business of Serbia, all by Serbs affiliated with groups supporting Muammar Qaddafi. I had alienated with my interference in Vojvodinian affairs a group of internationally-minded nationalist Serbs with violent, fascist, extremist sympathies. They knew where I had worked, and they sent these messages through Facebook to an account listed as private. Though their research had missed the obvious ethnic unlikelihood of my Nazi tendencies, surprising given the obsession with ethnicity to which Balkan nationalists are predisposed, they were skilled enough to find vital information about me, and I doubted it would take much to find current workplace, address, phone numbers, professional and social networks, everything one needs to disrupt the life of a target.

I was having coffee with my Georgian contact David, discussing war and nationalism and Russia and the possibilities of future violence and possibly the dissolution of his country. He could watch my face changing and
growing less confident as my BlackBerry continued to alert me to my incoming messages. As I explained the situation, he grew more and more uncomfortable, so I gave him my favorite platitude: “If they’re shooting at you, you must be doing something right,” and despite my fear, I flashed what I hoped was a convincingly confident smile. These were perhaps the wrong words to say to a Georgian whose neighborhood had literally been crushed by Russian tanks two years earlier. “Yeah,” he replied, nervously, “but… they’re still shooting at you…”

He wasn’t wrong. I was on the border of Russia, where Russia was known to have agents acting in their interest, involved in a dispute in which Russians interests were very much at stake. That their Serbian counterparts had already done the research did not bode well for my future. I deactivated my Facebook and pulled my public profile. Balkan nationalists are a terrifying thing once you’ve seen them in action. To be on the receiving end of their vicious rage takes it to a whole new level. I wasn’t about to stop, too much rides on this, but I’d have to be smarter about it in the future. I suppose I could understand the perspectives of those who won’t lift a finger or get involved…

… Or can I? I’m just one person, a twenty-two-year-old kid when I got started on this, and I’ve made an impact, shallow though it may be: I scared them. Or at least pissed them off. I hadn’t changed anything, not at
that point, but their reaction showed the potential of my efforts, the recognition that the nationalists’ upper-hand only lasts so long as it remains unchallenged, due to fear or apathy. But those before me and since who have failed to act, they are not individuals. They are institutions. They are powerful, they are safe, and they are charged with preventing the kind of atrocities, slow and subtle as they may be, occurring in Vojvodina. We cannot accept fear as an excuse for inaction. There is no acceptable excuse for the implicit allowance of ethnic cleansing. Is the conscience of the international community to be held hostage by individual threats by zealous nationalists? Is individual fear seeping through the seemingly-impenetrable walls of international institutions? And if fear is allowed to cripple those charged with protecting human rights and democracy, then one must ask, what is the point of allowing the continued existence of these useless institutions? What are they doing other than ensuring the continuity of their employment?

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Stefica

I find myself back in Novi Sad to mourn once more as Stefania, the grandmother of Tatjana, the woman who had first explained Trianon to me, is buried. At
78, drowned in her own lungs after improper care from a local doctor, she died yesterday as she’d lived, the victim of a broken system.

Stefica, as we’d come to know her, was born in 1933 in Zemun, outside Belgrade. She was the middle of three sisters in a traditionally Vojvodinian family, part-Hungarian, part-German, part-Slavic. When her parents finally conceived a son, her father was so proud, he went to the local bar. When they found his body sitting in the bar three days later, the obvious conclusion was alcohol poisoning. In the ensuing celebration of his “gaining an heir,” he drank himself to death, so Stefica, her two sisters and their baby brother were raised without a father.

She grew up speaking Serbian, but the last gift her father left her was his German last name. Despite speaking no German, when the Second Great War came to find their city, the family found themselves in a Yugoslav concentration camp. She was 12 when her eldest sister died in the camp. Her mother married one of the Serbian guards to save the rest of her children, and when they were released and the war ended, she spent the remainder of her youth on the guard’s farm in northern Serbia.

Stefania married a young Hungarian at age 18, and by 19, she had a son. When her son was three, his father took him to learn to hunt. On the way back from the hunt, riding on his motorbike, her husband’s rifle discharged and, as it was aimed upward, took with it her husband’s
skull. At 22, she was a widow and a single mother. Shortly after meeting and marrying her second husband, she fell down a flight of stairs, breaking her spine in two places. After a botched series of procedures by undertrained Yugoslav surgeons, she was informed she’d never walk again. Out of sheer inat and determination, in a year she was walking and working.

She spent her later life as a grandmother and a homemaker. Her previous hardships allowed her to be a pillar of support and advice for her family in the hard times that were to find them in the ‘80s and ‘90s. She had had the joy of seeing her first great-grandchild born a year earlier, as well as the fear of loss when, as a precursor to her own demise, a doctor who had been too busy to make the proper diagnosis nearly killed the child in the womb. She kept friends and acquaintances and even suitors up until the week she died. When she passed, it was surrounded by doctors and medics and with the knowledge that her family had been alerted and were on their way to meet her. Yet, even in death, the Serbian authorities could not spare her one last indignity. After the police confiscated her remains, they brought them to the next city for a bogus “investigation”. When her son retrieved her body this morning for her burial, she had been robbed by the police of both of her wedding rings, as well as the mandatory cash she insisted everyone in her family carry.

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Stefania was a miraculously strong woman. Not necessarily a stoic; her later struggles were well-known to friends and family. A fatherless youth spent in concentration camps, twice a widow, insult on top of injury, she survived the injustices of her life with grace and strength, and wholly without help or charity. She will live on in the memories of those who knew her, with joy and respect, but also with some small bitterness: She deserved a better life, and she deserved a better death. Imagine how different it all could have been, but for the idiocy of politics. Her plight was the direct result of the ignorant decisions of “great” men, from Woodrow Wilson to Richard Holbrooke, from Joseph Stalin to Slobodan Milosevic. Their big plans, backroom deals, sanctions, power struggles and ever-shifting borders created the system of corruption and apathy that stole Stefica’s life, her potential, her joy. Domestically and internationally, it behooves every decision-maker to remember Stefica.

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Goodbye Europe

It is no longer safe for me in Serbia. After Terezia’s bombing and the smugglers’ imprisonment, as Milosevic’s party returns to power, Tomislav “Gravedigger” Nikolic and the nationalists once more rise, and the European
Union strongly considers Serbia’s candidacy. The situation grows ever more dire and it was decided that Vojvodina could no longer bide their time, and most of the preceding interviews were released as an e-book. This was met with vicious attacks from nationalists, the start of which were just trickling in when I was in Georgia. Now, as I and several others from the movement began a self-imposed exile to avoid the threats to our safety from people who had shown they knew where we lived and worked, the tide is turning again for the worse. Even the centrists, the moderates and the non-nationalists are corrupt. Former President Boris Tadic exchanged votes for bags of rice in his 2012 election, as one might see in the so-called third world, and still lost the election to The Gravedigger.

Vojvodina does not seek secession because of its ethnic minority population. In fact, contrary to the other movements that have come before in Yugoslavia and to those movements throughout the rest of the world that will be discussed in the coming chapters, Vojvodina is the rare case of a people seeking to break away from their ethnic kin country in pursuit of better, more transparent self-government and greater accountability in terms of their own development. Vojvodina could be a model of good governance. Multi-ethnic, multi-interest voting, multi-party with compromise. This dream is unachievable in a nation where even the good guys are bribing voters.
Vojvodina remains a part of an ugly, backward, corrupt nation-state with no concern for a Vojvodinian future.

The Arab Spring has largely hurt ethnic minorities throughout the region, and until Gezi Park, an uprising was to the people of Vojvodina an unattractive prospect. As the protests in Turkey began unifying all citizens, Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Georgians, Azeris, against an abusive state, there were whispers that maybe the world had had enough. As Brazil followed suit, and then Chile, the women of Vojvodina are eying the possibility of a peaceful mass protest as well. But such unity has not lasted in any of these movements, and the conventional route remains more attractive.

Conflict is reemerging on the border of Serbia and Kosovo. The nationalists inspire their followers to open fire on NATO troops. Funny timing, the nationalists started shooting the day after former minister Dragan Veselinov, who served Prime Minister Dindic before his assassination, called for an independence referendum in Vojvodina.

“So long as Kosovo remains a hot zone, the issue of Vojvodina will never be heard on the international level,” said Nevena, speaking at a conference in Berlin. Her conversation partner, Bosnian Defense Minister Selmo Cikotic, responded with beautifully succinct clarity: “Well, that’s the point, isn’t it?”
European Union entrance as Yugoslavia before 1991 could have saved Vojvodina and prevented hundreds of thousands of deaths. Vojvodina’s autonomy and demographics and very European culture would have been respected and the region protected. It could have saved Vojvodina. It could have saved Bosnia. But that ship has sailed.

European Union entrance with Serbia will merely advance the steady destruction of Vojvodina. The entirely bogus “statute of autonomy” adopted for Vojvodina by Serbia in 2010 was an attempt to meet regulations of the European Union, a façade that will likely be taken at face value. It was then followed by the arrests of war criminals Hadzic and Mladic and the autonomy issue itself was entirely obscured. Romania is a perfect case study of the dangers of EU expansion. When Romania was attempting to enter, it made large, public steps toward anti-corruption and minority rights. Once they had successfully entered and the promise of those new markets opening for Romanian business and workers could not be removed, the anti-corruption agents were fired and the situation for ethnic minorities like Roma rapidly declined. Serbia will not do better.

European Union entrance as Vojvodina, now that’s an option. “We Do Not Want A Path To Europe. We Want To Go Back To Europe” is a slogan of many Vojvodinian
movements. The will is there. The expansion would be just and right. It is also, therefore, highly unlikely.

“Farewell, Europe, don’t wait for us anymore” sings Djordje Balasevic, Vojvodina’s and Yugoslavia’s Immortal Bard (translated, if poorly, from Serbo-Croatian). “Don’t ask too much or you may also get in trouble. Farewell, world, we had a great time together. We are fine, just as we deserved… Sorry, my friend, it is the fault of us who remained silent.”

If Balasevic is right that Vojvodina must say Farewell to Europe, he is wrong about who is to blame. We are to blame. The United States of America along with France and Great Britain, for the initial atrocities of Trianon and Versailles. NATO for the bombing of Vojvodina as Serbia. The European Union for unthinkingly pushing Croatia toward accession with veto power over the remaining former Yugoslav states’ membership and thereby pushing Serbia straight into the arms of Russia. The OSCE for their negligence and irresponsibility. And all of us for our lack of creativity, for our inability to think outside a broken framework built 300 years earlier. We in the West, in the international community, are to blame for watching as the vibrant flame of yet another culture is extinguished from Europe. But perhaps there is still time.
A Parting Thought

Why is a genocide more horrific than democide? Why is the slaughter of an ethnicity or a race a greater crime than the tearing apart of a multiethnic society and the slaughter of a broad spectrum of peoples?

I ask this as a Jew now living in Germany, an unfortunate part of my own family pictured in an exhibit in Berlin’s Museum to the Murdered Jews of Europe. I ask this as an American, raised in a tradition and belief that one mass murder rises above all others as the most horrific, a Euro-Atlantic tradition to focus on the Holocaust and German guilt. It is a dominating belief at the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But is the wiping out of two-thirds of an ethnic group truly worse than the wiping out of a greater number of ethnically dissimilar but culturally cohesive peoples? How is the loss of one culture based on a bloodline worse than the loss of dozens of cultures that are not based in blood?

This is not to declare genocide less important, or even to judge whether there is a hierarchy of mass murder or the value of said hierarchy. It is instead simply to ask: How can we decry genocide but ignore the unmaking of
centuries of multiethnicity and the 80 million\textsuperscript{33} multiethnic deaths caused by the treaties of Versailles, Trianon and Paris? The suffering of the pre-and-post-Nazi Germans, the deaths of those who once pledged allegiance\textsuperscript{xxix} to the Austro-Hungarian, Prussian and Ottoman Empires, deaths through starvation, relocation and the slaughter that comes with the making of homogeneity, these deaths are greater in number. Yet we pretend they never happened, that the world has always been divided along non-porous pure ethnic borders and that it somehow didn’t take mass murder to achieve it.

Europe has been almost fully homogenized, and it didn’t take the Holocaust. Poland, France, England, Scotland, Greece, Spain, Catalonia, Austria, Italy, Holland, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and so forth, all the way through the continent. Europe can claim to embrace equality, now that it has almost wholly rid itself of heterogeneity. Vojvodina was among the last vestiges of multiethnicity on the continent, and the other was destroyed by Russia in 2014. European heterogeneity, in fact the phenomenon of multiethnicity globally, is endangered and on the brink of extinction. But all is not lost, not for Vojvodina, nor for others that wish to live in non-sovereign harmony.

\textsuperscript{xxix} due entirely to geography, not ideology
Section 3: The Over-State-ment of Sovereignty

A History of Self-Determination

To call the Yugoslav dissolution, aside from Kosovo, an ethnic struggle is to buy in to the rhetoric of power-hungry nationalists. Though there is more claim to an ethnic element in Vojvodina than in Croatia or Bosnia or Slovenia or Montenegro, to call Vojvodina an ethnic struggle is to fall into the same simple trap and risk the same failed solution.

Over and over this process goes. But we can end the cycle. We can stop the mindless march of violence, civil war and ethnic cleansing. The gaps that destroyed Yugoslavia were manufactured and avoidable. The languages were the same, the cultures were largely the same, the religion had not particularly mattered, with few notable exceptions as in Kosovo. These rifts of which everyone speaks, these “ancient hatreds” that tore Yugoslavia apart, were manufactured. Kosovo was a problem, demographically, religiously, historically. Kosovo was perhaps an irreconcilable difference from the moment of its entry into the Yugoslav family, but the rest of the strife was wholly avoidable. The manufacture of
these gaps has not ceased with the wars, and they continue to destroy Vojvodina.

As Gordana Susa was already quoted earlier regarding Bosnia, but because the point cannot be made strongly enough,

Multi-ethnic cities were especially targeted. The chief enemy of the JNA was common life, coexistence... Living proof that people of different societies living together in one city, working together, that went against the nationalist propaganda that tried to present ethnic communities forced to live together against their wills, torn apart by ancient ethnic hatreds.³⁴

The common nationalist propaganda of “ancient hatreds” was promoted by the early foreign coverage like Robert Kaplan’s Balkan Ghosts, stories that weave a brilliant tale but misdirect attention from the domestic political criminals and still dominate the debate over Yugoslavia, giving the ethnic nationalists an excuse for their horrors. This violent hatred for the multiethnic successfully divided the entire region along ethnic lines before taking a particularly insidious turn in its evolution: In non-violence, as they ethnically cleanse Vojvodina today, Serbia took all the glory out of intervention.

xxx An interesting paradox, as under Tito the military had been a melting pot for young men from all regions (see Crnobrnja, M. [1996]. The Yugoslav Drama. McGill Queens University Press. p. 122.)
Yet there is precedent. There is a chance for peace and for a sustainable future, not just for Vojvodina, but for Vojvodina within Serbia, if Serbia can swallow the bitter pill of compromise, the only prescription that can save the larger Serbian state. The opportunity to make things right is here. As Vesna said, now is the moment of truth. If 40 years is the timeline, as with Moses, let’s look back just that far, to 1975 and remember Yugoslavia’s golden years.

When this text was initially composed, it was intended to be a multi-chapter book exploring the equally intense but vastly divergent stories of autonomist movements throughout the world. However, in the five years since working with the Vojvodinians, this author has had the privilege of spending time with autonomists and secessionists in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Catalonia, Dalmatia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia, Israeli-occupied Palestine, all the way to the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. In territories where security could not be guaranteed for autonomists and interview partners within national borders, meetings occurred instead with expatriate representatives of similar movements from the Basque country, the Tamils of Sri Lanka, and the Kurds of Turkey and Syria. Throughout those years of research, seeing and hearing the same oppressions, the same complaints, the same fights, the same negligence by international actors, occurring over and over, as Rage Against The Machine sang “same
bodies… but with different last names,” I’ve been led to a single, unmistakable conclusion: the autonomist struggle is a global systemic challenge requiring not a case by case study and response, but a full overhaul in our international understanding and treatment of sovereignty and self-determination. The stories of all those aforementioned movements are at least as gripping as the Vojvodinians, but if all we focus on is the story, then each of them becomes just another interesting tragedy. We must study and critique the theoretical and legal framework of Vojvodina’s plight in order to prevent it from happening again, or worse, believing it to be inevitable. So from here, stories will continue, but they will be more focused, their scope more systemic.

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The “Peace” of Westphalia and Theories of Sovereignty

Sovereignty is viewed as the ultimate goal of any free people. A land to call their own, unreuled by any other power, truly the definition of the right to self-determination. From Hobbes to Arendt, the idea of sovereignty and self-rule has evolved via Westphalian Order and compromise into today’s prevailing view that individual freedom can only be realized through the establishment of a strong sovereign, monarchic or
democratic, with secure geographic borders. Yet the following chapters discuss, similarly to the case of Vojvodina, examples of the tragedies that have befallen the modern world through the hegemony of this overly simplistic and perhaps outdated viewpoint. Exploring failures in modern sovereignty and looking at other theoretical forms of freedom and self-determination, however, provides the opportunity to revise the hegemony of strict fixed sovereignty. First, though, it is worth exploring its origins.

What is today known as the Treaty of Westphalia was really a series of treaties in 1648 between the rulers of Western and Central Europe. After 30 years of war amongst Sweden, France, Denmark, Norway, Spain, Hungary, England, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, the Hapsburgs, the Ottomans, and a spate of defunct Germanic states, and a concurrent 80 years of war amongst the Hapsburgs, the Spanish, the Dutch, the English and the French, the Peace of Westphalia was a welcomed end to the conflicts.

The “treaty” itself was a series of arbitrary decisions on borders made through a Hobbesian modus operandi, undemocratically decreed by a ruling class that was itself unaffected by the agreement. It was to bring

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Hobbes believed the state exists to protect people from one another, and that the state’s leader (the sovereign) is given the citizen’s full allegiance in exchange for that protection. In short, so long as the leader protects you from others, he can abuse you as he sees fit.
peace in Europe, though there was limited evidence to make a case for this outcome. Westphalian sovereignty has been defined by Stephen Krasner as “an institutional arrangement for organizing political life that is based on two principles: territoriality and the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures,”\textsuperscript{36} and has been for three centuries the basic foundation of international relations. It assumes a Hobbesian social contract with absolute power granted to the sovereign to rule over and decide for the ruled in exchange for safety and security.

Despite the absence at the signing of the treaty of any person living at any point along the newly-created borders, or even anyone able to speak for their interests, democratic society is based on a world of Westphalian sovereignty. Even today, the illusion that when the treaties were signed world peace was secured seems to be held by most international actors. Those who point to the success of Westphalia, however, inevitably forget that Spain and France remained at war for the following eleven years. The entire modern world order relies upon the belief that Westphalia was a success. Unfortunately, that position requires a suspension of disbelief of which only diplomats, politicians and patriots are capable.

It is most certainly worth exploring alternatives not just to our modern approaches to statecraft, but to their philosophical foundations, an endeavour undertaken by far too few practitioners of international politics. Much of
what follows may sound dry to the point of tedium, but one must understand the philosophical underpinnings of a system to properly challenge it. All international relations scholars explore Hobbes, Rousseau and Machiavelli, yet too few challenge them. Moving back 250 years, Rousseau reminds us “Above all, let us not conclude with Hobbes, that because man has no idea of goodness, he must be naturally wicked; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue...” Rousseau’s own ideas on the evolution of sovereignty have many parallels to Hobbes’, but the vital difference is that of the intent of the state and the placement of sovereignty. Breaking from Hobbes, who believes that the state exists for mutual security, Rousseau views it as a naturally evolving organism rising from shared culture and convenience. He also views sovereignty as separate from government and belonging to the people, where Hobbes places all powers in the single sovereign, given by but eternally separate from the people. Both, though they have their differences, believe that it is the nation-state that guarantees the rights of man. Despite the fact that each of these historical theorists was willing to question their predecessors and the prevailing mode of thought at their time, modern international relations seems perfectly willing to accept them each, with their conflicting truths, as truth.

There do exist certain notable exceptions to the rule that theorists are stuck three centuries in the past. Hannah
Arendt explored state-sovereignty in great depth. The world, to her, is composed of State Peoples, those who were granted their own ethnic nation; Equal Partners, functioning together within a multiethnic federation; Minorities, less-equal members of other ethnically-defined states; and Stateless Peoples, with no government to speak of, living in lawless anarchy. The overarching worldview was one of absolute state sovereignty, that “[t]rue freedom, true emancipation, and true popular sovereignty could be attained only with full national emancipation, that people without their own national government were deprived of human rights”.39

After the World Wars, the world saw a subtle but radical shift in the perception of sovereignty. It was no longer the state that defined the nation, but the nation that defined the state. This was not necessarily an improvement, as this is the transition that led to the Yugoslav tragedy. Instead of a tool to protect the people of the state, the state became a tool to protect and serve the ethnic nation that purportedly comprised it. What was sought was the rights of man. What was created was the rights of citizens. When citizenship is the province of the nationalist state, and the great states break up into smaller ethnic nations, then the institutions of the law are not built around the rights of all men, but of one kind of man. This led perhaps not to an increase in state violence, nor even a new sanctioned use of the state as a violent actor, but to a
different motivating force toward the violent actions of the state.

An ideal illustration of sovereign evolution can be found in French theorist Gregoire Chamayou’s modern treatise *Drone Theory*:

Theories can sometimes be summed up efficiently by an image or a drawing. The frontispiece of *Leviathan* shows a giant whose torso rises above the land. The figure is recognizable from its classic attributes: sword, crown, and scepter. But it is his clothing that attracts attention: his coat of mail is woven entirely from tiny human bodies. The state is an artifact, a machine – even “the machine of all machines” – but the components that constitute it are simply the living bodies of its subjects. The enigma of sovereignty and that of its constitution, as well of its possible dissolution, is resolved by the question of its material: what is the state made from?

What Hobbes did, La Boetie had tried to undo, and by the same means. After all, the master who oppresses you and “for whom you go bravely to war, for whose greatness you do not refuse to offer your own bodies unto death… where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you?” Therein lay the fundamental material contradiction: if power is embodied solely by our bodies, we can always refuse to offer them. Arendt explained that, owing to this fundamental corporeal dependence, the power of the state – even
in the most authoritarian regimes – must, despite everything, be power and not pure violence. There is no power without bodies. But, as she in a way acknowledged, the reciprocal statement is true: with no bodies mobilized, there is no longer any power.

A different age produces a different image. In 1924, a popularizing scientific magazine announced a new invention: a radio-commanded policing automaton. The robocop of the twenties was to be equipped with projective eyes, caterpillar tracks, and, to serve as fists, rotating blow-dealing truncheons inspired by the weapons of the Middle Ages. On its lower belly, a small metal penis allowed it to spray tear gas at unruly parades of human protestors. It had an exhaust outlet for an anus. This ridiculous robot that pissed tear gas and farted black smoke provides a perfect illustration of an ideal of a drone state.40

From a great king in a suit of his own loyal subjects to an obscene automaton created to control the same subjects, sovereignty has evolved rapidly from the Great Wars onward, moving through multiple stages of autonomy, whether students and practitioners of international relations recognize it or not. While colonial autonomy has fallen, at least in its direct and obvious state-based form, it is difficult if not impossible to foresee a future without great powers, and therefore without vassal states and protectorates. A critical observation of practical sovereignty such as that by Kenneth Waltz suggests that
“pure sovereignty” is the purview of the greatest of Great Powers alone. The Great Powers control the academies and international institutions, but that such self-centered concepts of pure sovereignty continue to govern global structures is neither logical nor appropriate.

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Three Centuries Past Westphalia, No Lessons Learned

330 years later, after two World Wars and dozens of smaller conflicts throughout Europe over Westphalian border-and-sovereignty oriented issues, the Westphalian Order has been seen in its most corrupted form in the Balkans. The General Framework for Bosnia, or Dayton Accords, was created by then-unindicted war criminals Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia and Franjo Tudjman of Croatia alongside a coalition of US and European diplomats and military advisors following the multi-front war in Bosnia. The input from Bosnians or their chosen representatives was very limited. These external actors arbitrarily created the borders and laws of modern Bosnia, undemocratically constructing what they intended to be a democratic nation; a democratic nation that to this day does not have the jurisdiction, either by election or by the courts, to alter this imposed infrastructure. Over three centuries of war and strife in Europe, the basic lessons of 188
the failures of externally-imposed state-building seem not to have been learned.

In both Westphalia and Dayton, Europe was divided arbitrarily and with limited respect for any history beyond the decade prior. In the case of Westphalia, as shown above, peace was secured in word, though not action. In the case of Dayton, the rhetoric declared regional peace fully secured, yet Kosovo embroiled the world in bitter conflict three years later. However, when France, Britain, Sweden, Spain and the Habsburgs were done dividing Europe at Westphalia, they each went home and ruled their own chosen or native lands, and left their neighbors and co-signatories to do the same. When the International Community was done dividing the former Yugoslavia, they were not so laissez-faire.

I found myself in Bosnia in 2010 as a parliamentary election monitor for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). While there, I could have been sent back to Sarajevo or to Mostar, even to Srebrenica, but I had the special privilege of monitoring the elections in Brčko district. The Dayton Accords, the Western-imposed treaty that ended the Bosnian war in an uneasy and unfair draw and left the country an ungovernable mess for 15 years, are the crowning achievement of international bureaucracy. An International Law professor told me “if you understand Dayton, leave this class because you already know too
much.” Well, Brčko is the jewel atop the crown of Dayton, the most amazing example of political and economic limbo, the ultimate argument against long-term international intervention.

Brčko is the dividing line of the war, comprised of approximately 46% Serbs, 43% Bosnians and 11% Croats, disputed between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosnia proper, but ruled by the International Community. There remain several divided villages of Serbs and Bosnians, huge refugee villages on both sides, a powerful Wahhabi sect\(^\text{xxxii}\), and at least two uncleared mine fields.

What was most interesting in my role, though, were the 29,000 citizens of Brčko district, mostly the non-Bosnian ethnic minorities, who were turned away from voting because of poorly defined election rules. In the rest of the country, as with most democracies, simply being a citizen above 18 years of age with a valid ID was enough to vote. Not here. In Brčko, due to a little-known piece of divisive legislation, if you did not register for either the Serb Republic or the Bosnian Federation elections, you were refused the right to vote. Unlike in previous years, where voters had grown used to international observers actually clarifying and enforcing election laws, this election it was the stated role of the observers to do

\(^{\text{xxxii}}\) Eight members of this sect were arrested and 15 more expelled earlier the same year for attempted terrorism, and a group of them laid siege to the US embassy in November 2011.

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nothing more than observe, to stand in the polling place and mark down improprieties in secret. We were not even fully able to monitor the most important and corruptible aspect, the vote count, as we were given orders from Sarajevo to cease our observations of vote-counting by 3am, when in Brčko the count was not expected to be complete until at least 7am. Add to this that Bosnian voters have for over a decade experienced OSCE-run, not OSCE-monitored, elections, and we, the Short Term Observers, were viewed as the ultimate authority, but were forced, when asked for clarification on any subject, such as this mass voter suppression, to defer to the local Bosnian poll captain. By our very presence, we legitimized on behalf of 56 nations the suppression of 29,000 otherwise legal voters without even promising a valid vote count. That another conflict did not break out over this issue was miraculous, and perhaps testament to the diplomatic skill of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose uncharacteristically pro-Serbian rhetoric during her subsequent visit hinted at some sort of deal to maintain stability.xxxiii

“What have we done?” asked my observation partner. She’d monitored many elections in this manner on behalf of the Hungarian government, but this was something new. “This is life,” said our translator. She’d

xxxiii If only Private Manning had waited a few more months, perhaps Wikileaks could have given us insight into what that was all about.
worked with the NATO and EU forces after Dayton to keep peace in the area. “This is intervention. Here in the Balkans, nobody trusts the occupying West. We in Bosnia know that Bill Clinton and Tony Blair’s intervention was on our behalf, but what actually happened was the enhancement of the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia and increase in size of the Bosnian Serb and Croat aggressors’ lands from 31% to 49%.”xxxiv Our shoddy monitoring of these semi-fraudulent elections was the very least in almost two decades of accidental (or not) Western crimes in the former Yugoslavia. In Kosovo, many like Noam Chomsky argue that NATO intervention caused the entire situation to explode from tension to full-blown conflict. Further from our work, in Dead Aid, a well-argued and provocatively titled analysis of Western aid to Africa, Harvard economist Dambisa Moyo blames international economic aid for the crippling of the economies of those African countries our humanitarian programs most sought to help and has cemented corruption and the power of warlords.44 Evidence of her argument is clearly visible back in Sarajevo, where the aid community has built up a multi-billion-dollar humanitarian district of high-priced hotels and restaurants, with all the public rebuilding that

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xxxiv Old Joke: What’s the difference between 1995’s Dayton Peace Plan & 1993’s Vance-Owen Peace Plan?  
Answer 1: Richard Holbrooke’s airtime;  
Answer 2: The body count.  
If you laughed at either of these punchlines, you need to get out more.  
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comes with such war tourism, while the rest of the city lives in abject poverty and the entire country is on the verge of collapse and a return to civil war.

It is an unthinkably thin line between humanitarianism and tragedy. Our work in Bosnia was a jagged double-edged sword. Were we strengthening the democratic process and laying the groundwork for future elections of hope and change for the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina? Or were we simply lending legitimacy to the hold on power by Bosnia’s corrupt party bosses and sowers of ethnic strife? The civil war that could easily precipitate from this election would be at least partially on us and the other “humanitarians” coming in for the festivities of the election. These are questions many wished I’d kept to myself.

My public statements on the situation were not viewed favorably by the OSCE administrators. I was asked to leave the country by the organization’s foreign bureaucrats, and lectured directly by the Head of Mission, Dutch Ambassador Daan Everts, about how much work had been put in and how much harder I’d made his job. Yet, if the European Union and the international community take seriously the tenets of democracy, human rights and self-determination, it cannot blind itself to the realities of its actions and those of its candidate states. If the OSCE allows the suppression of 29,000 votes and the easy corruption of the vote count, it has done a grave,
unconscionable disservice to the Bosnian people, the future Bosnian state, and the European Union as an institution. The only people who benefit are those presently in power, the ethnic profiteers and the self-interested foreign diplomats who seek credibility, not stability. Seven months later, those seeds of unrest had taken root, and the Bosnian Serbs were calling a referendum for independence.45

“The authorities in Republika Srpska have taken concrete actions which represent the most serious violation of the Dayton-Paris peace agreement that we have seen since the agreement was signed,” said Valentin Inzko, High Representative of Bosniaxxxv, on May 10, 2011. “The conclusions and the decision on the referendum... are not only a clear breach of the peace agreement but also put into question all laws -- I repeat -- all laws enacted by the respective high representatives, claiming they are in violation of the peace agreement.”46

With that statement, Bosnia’s High Representative declared the newly-proposed independence referendum by the Serb Republic an act of aggression, of provocation. His proclamation carried with it the full power of a disinterested and over-extended international community, the last flails of a dying institution no longer respected by any party under its authority, praying that the Serbs

xxxv though himself an Austrian and not a Bosnian, of course

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would not call its bluff. Within two days, the leaders of the Serb Republic had bowed to those international pressures, strengthening the illusion of Inzko’s authority and postponing the inevitable. Three years later, however, the entire country, not just the Serb Republic, had erupted into anti-occupation and anti-governmental violence. 100 years after World War One erupted out of an act of violence against a Habsburg in Sarajevo, an Austrian autocrat is once more inciting the hatred of the Bosnian people.

Calling the 1995 Dayton Accords a “Peace Agreement” is a fallacy and a travesty. Dayton was built to fail, a hasty bandage applied to a situation that had nearly bled out in order to create a façade of western concern for human rights. That it has taken 15 years to show these emerging signs of collapse is nothing short of miraculous. That the High Representative is only now seeing how shaky the foundation upon which his institution was built is testament only to his self-delusion.

The nation of Bosnia is in constant battles over its sovereignty, having fought a long, bloody, costly multi-front war in the name of self-determination. Yet they are ruled by foreign-appointed autocrats, High Representatives with absolute power over all legal and political matters. So powerful are they that, while announcing a new head of the EU delegation in Bosnia in 2011, UK Labour politician Catherine Ashton declared “I am pleased to make this announcement just days after my
visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a result of which the referendum in Republika Srpska was cancelled. We now have to build on this success as we strive to put Bosnia and Herzegovina on a path towards the EU.”

To clarify her point, the success of which she spoke was the halting of a popular referendum by a supposedly democratic society whose democracy it was her charge to nurture and protect.

There is indeed legal precedent for her authoritarian power play. In 1997, Bosnia’s courts declared:

> the Constitutional Court is not competent to evaluate the constitutionality of the General Framework Agreement as the Constitutional Court has in fact been established under the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to uphold this Constitution (...) The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina was adopted as Annex IV to the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and consequently there cannot be a conflict or a possibility for controversy between this Agreement and the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina.48

This ruling was reaffirmed in 2003.

Few Bosnian citizens trust the institution of the Bosnian state. The Serbs feel, often rightly, that the legal system is biased against them. The Croats feel, with powerful evidence to back their claim, that they are
second-class, marginalized citizens within the Bosnian Federation. The Bosnians themselves have little desire to share governance with the same Croat-Serb partnership responsible for the atrocities of the 90s. This was all obvious in Brčko in October 2010, but Representative Inzko and his international cohorts applauded the election as free and fair, ignoring and denying the obvious breaches of democracy innate in the Dayton Accords and the laws that have emerged since.

What good is an election if it only upholds the illusion of democracy? We strengthened the facade of freedom and gave continued legitimacy to the corrupt institutions of the Bosnian state and Dayton, allowing Mr. Inzko to feel entitled to his near-dictatorial position. His feeling of entitlement is obvious through his emphasis in the previous quote that the referendum’s most dangerous feature is that it will “put into question all laws -- I repeat - - all laws enacted by the respective high representatives, claiming they are in violation of the peace agreement”. But how could a people who claim to be in any way free not reject the authorities of an externally-appointed autocratic foreign High Representative?

Before the war, the region was prosperous both agriculturally and industrially. Certainly, conflict has much to do with their fall from grace, but the division of Dayton has left a fragile, stagnating economy only supplemented by a bustling black market, with no hope of
restoration or local redevelopment. The only aspect of the Bosnian economy that is thriving is that multi-billion-dollar humanitarian district, self-perpetuating with little trickle-down benefit.

Yes, significant blame falls on the sectarian politicians profiting from the division and strife. But Bosnia’s systemic corruption relies on the Dayton framework, and responsibility can easily be shirked with blame placed on foreign occupiers, such as an all-powerful High Representative, an indefinite position created by Dayton. As the cracks show more and more visibly in the framework upon which the union of Bosnia-Herzegovina was built, the international community must come to terms with the reality that Dayton was built to fail.

There are dangers in dissolution and disengagement, to be sure. Paramilitary civil war is not out of the question, but it never has been, even under Dayton. Despite the oft-discussed dangers, the militaries of both entities are declawed, leaving neutered states, incapable of the kind of state violence witnessed in the 90s (though a savage civil violence the likes of Rwanda is never ruled out). Dissolution is decried as a guaranteed path to war, but it is more likely that the violent nationalist rhetoric that plagues this failed union can only be mitigated by disengagement. Allowing a dissolution of the Bosnian state, allowing the people of Bosnia to choose their own way forward, be that through a full breakup into smaller
ethnic countries or through an attempted multi-ethnic state with regional ethnic autonomy and without a supreme internationally-imposed authority, whatever they choose the primary point is that the disengagement and departure of the international community is the only viable long-term path to peace. As the dysfunctional, paralyzed non-state created at Dayton, there is only poverty, strife and ethnic tension.

“Dayton was not fair. It created the basis for an illogical peace. In contrast to postwar Germany, there was no ‘de-Nazification’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Dayton was an attempt to build democracy upon the quagmire of national hatred. The treaty rewarded those who had waged war,” wrote Fabian Schmidt, expert in Albanian and Bosnian affairs for the German state’s international broadcaster Deutsche Welle, in 2005. High Representative Inzko’s predecessor Paddy Ashdown hoped Dayton would be dismantled a decade ago. The situation in 2014, which Inzko called “the worst” since the end of the war, was the fault of the treaty that built the office he now holds. The way forward is not with threats like those Inzko made to call in EU troops against the civilians whose well-being is his responsibility. It’s been 15 years since we buried Tudjman, eight years since we buried Milosevic, and four years since we buried Holbrooke. It’s time to bury Dayton, for Bosnia’s sake.
There is no future for a united Bosnia under Dayton. But that doesn’t mean the situation is hopeless.

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Fractured Sovereignty on the Field of Blackbirds

On an institutional level, beyond the Bosnian example, December 2010 gave another opportunity to watch the former Yugoslavia, the most shining example of foreign intervention gone wrong since Woodrow Wilson carved up the Austro-Hungarian Empire and made way for global communism. In November, Kosovo’s parliament voted to dissolve itself. In a commentary on how bad the situation actually was, ousted Prime Minister Hashim Thaci\textsuperscript{xxxvi} called the dissolution “a responsible decision that will mark a new beginning for the state of Kosovo.”\textsuperscript{52}

While the Dayton Accords rendered Bosnia ungovernable, NATO and the OSCE’s intervention in Kosovo did not even give the Kosovars an opportunity to try, to even pretend that they were participating in a democracy of their choosing until 2009. For a decade, all decisions were made by NATO and the UN. Even the Kosovar constitution was written ostensibly not by a

\textsuperscript{xxxvi} Who would himself later be tried for his role in the harvesting and smuggling of the organs of Serb prisoners-of-war

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citizen or a group of citizens but by a Finnish diplomat, Martti Ahtisaari, the entire process known as the Ahtisaari Plan.53

Noam Chomsky, representing the far left of US thought, was quite put off by

the exuberance the war elicited in Western intellectual circles and the tidal wave of self-adulation by respected voices, lauding the first war in history fought ‘in the name of principles and values,’ the first bold step towards a ‘new era’ in which the ‘enlightened states’ will protect the human rights of all under the guiding hand of an ‘idealistic New World bent on ending inhumanity,’ now freed from the shackles of archaic concepts of world order.54

His dispassionate disapproval is well-justified by the article that this paragraph begins. In it, he finds fault with NATO’s political logic in taking pains to document every war crime to provide justification for their invasion because

the vast crimes took place after the bombing began: they were not a cause but a consequence. It requires considerable audacity, therefore, to take the crimes to provide retrospective justification for the actions that contributed to inciting them.55

Chomsky spends his article arguing, quite eloquently and with convincing evidence, that any war crimes committed
in the conflict in Kosovo were either NATO’s or precipitated by NATO’s bombing campaign.

I would not be citing the notoriously one-sided Noam Chomsky here were his postulates not supported by a surprising source: NATO General Klaus Naumann. In his testimony to the UK’s House of Commons Defence Select Committee on the facts on the ground in Kosovo, Naumann declares

I think it is fair to say that Milosevic honoured the commitment which he had made to General Clark and myself on 25 October 1998. He withdrew the forces and he withdrew the police. There may have been some difference as to whether there were 200 or 400 policemen more or less but that really does not matter. More or less he honoured the commitment. Then the UJK or KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] filled the void the withdrawn Serb forces had left and they escalated. I have stated this in the NATO Council in October and November repeatedly. In most cases, the escalation came from the Kosovar side, not from the Serb side.56

Flying in the face of the rhetoric of the Western saviors concerned for the fate of the Kosovo Albanian Muslims, the crisis of this post-partum justification gets worse as we dig deeper.
Such political doublespeak as the politicization of the term “genocide” in Bosnia is a travesty with such delicate topics as human rights abuse, ethnic cleansing and war crimes, yet would be par for the course in NATO-allied politics. In 2000, as exhumations in NATO-occupied Kosovo neared their end, Paul Risley, The Hague tribunal’s press spokesman, reported that “The final number of bodies uncovered will be less than 10,000 and probably more accurately determined as between two and three thousand.” This number flies in the face of NATO rhetoric, where spokespeople reported the Serbs had killed at least 10,000 civilians, and discrediting the ludicrous charge by US Secretary of Defense William Cohen that 100,000 Kosovo Albanians were missing and “may have been murdered,” an attempt to draw parallels to, and then exceed, Srebrenica.

In The Guardian newspaper’s coverage of this emerging discrepancy, Jonathan Steele reports

the tribunal’s indictment of President Milosevic includes the charge that during NATO’s bombing campaign Serb police shot 105 ethnic Albanian men and boys near the village of Mala Krusa in western Kosovo. Witnesses claimed hay was piled on the bodies and set alight. Tribunal experts believe the remains may have been tampered with later, since the bones of only a few people were found.

The problem with the belief that they may have been tampered with is that the notoriously aggressive Chief
Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte declared from the outset the task of the exhumations was “not to prepare a complete list of war casualties. Our primary task is to gather evidence relevant to criminal charges.” Del Ponte’s team sought to support their case against those indicted, not necessarily seeking the whole truth. It seems to a less-involved observer that an equally likely story to evidence tampering would be that these charges were fabricated of whole cloth, not an unusual situation in the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia.

Not only are human rights not a universal value, the seemingly universal language of human rights within those communities and societies that value human rights is not universal. The universal language of humanitarianism is deeply manipulable and has an atrocious history of legitimating imperial expansion and the worst human rights abuses. If humanitarians, having already given rise to this military-humanitarian complex with their hijacked idealism, seek to do actual good in the world, to truly champion those human rights, a great deal more care must be taken in both discussing and acting on human rights abuses.

This abuse of humanitarian rhetoric has not simply been used to villainize the Serbs. It has been used to remove the rights of the people of Kosovo to their own self-determination, shifting the power from Serbia to NATO. If it is true that the International Community
ended the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, then for that they should be commended, though again it has been argued by many like Professor David Gibbs of the University of Arizona that NATO pressure caused the ethnic cleansing\textsuperscript{61}, and once again by NATO General Klaus Naumann that siding with the Kosovo Liberation Army covered up greater atrocities and aggression against the local Serbs. But the International Community’s true failure in Kosovo came from ignoring the advice and example of what could be referred to as the Shadow International Community, the community of veteran aid workers, volunteers, expats and non-political locals.

Professionalism is important. In diplomacy, education, security, policy-making, Professionals are the backbone of progress and consistency in their fields, and their contributions should not be underestimated. Yet too often, it is precisely the opposite that occurs: we forget that professionals are often wrong and we listen exclusively to their conventional wisdom.

David is an eloquent British prison-warden-turned-travel-agent who used to smuggle goods to civilians in Bosnia during the wars. He drove a truck full of coats, food, medical supplies, whatever the refugees needed and he could get. He was not UN, not Red Cross. He knew how to talk to all sides of a conflict, whom to trust and how to interpret lies. “The roads were said to be impassible... so we went that way.” And he knew how to
talk to the charitable individuals in uninvolved countries who wanted to help but didn’t trust the humanitarian community. David once convinced a British magistrate\textsuperscript{xxxvii} to put a hold on a burn order (prescribed by law) on confiscated counterfeit Nike clothing and instead let him deliver them out of country to freezing Bosnian refugees. He got a plumber to donate the ductwork to a Balkan orphanage. David organized logistics and delivered the goods and when the conflict or dire need was over, David got out and went back to planning people’s vacations and let the fledgling nations develop their own economies. But the international community did not follow David’s example and today 60% of Bosnia’s GDP is made up of governmental bureaucracy funded by international humanitarian aid. Governmental deadlock will be impossible to break when it is the only source of funds in the country.

Obviously, nothing was learned from the failure of Bosnian intervention, or perhaps the lesson learned was that international intervention must be more extreme, more authoritarian. In Kosovo, even the façade of sovereignty to which Bosnia clings is shattered, despite the rhetoric. NATO in 1999 placed KFOR in then-sovereign Serbian/Yugoslav land for purportedly humanitarian reasons, a force that at its peak numbered 50,000 troops.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{xxxvii} Also known as a judge
When Kosovo finally declared independence in 2008, KFOR still numbered 14,000 active troops. KFOR’s initial mandate was to deter hostility and threats against Kosovo by Serb forces; establish and maintain a secure environment in Kosovo, including public safety and civil order; demilitarize the Kosovo Liberation Army; support the international humanitarian effort; and coordinate with and support the international civil presence. Over time, however, their mandate expanded to include reconstruction; protection of holy/historical sites; medical assistance; border security; interdiction of cross-border weapons smuggling; and support for establishment of civilian institutions, law and order, judicial and penal system, electoral process and other aspects of political, economic and social life. KFOR went from a military presence intended, ostensibly, for the protections of civilians and assistance of international civilian presence, to a ruling military presence filling nearly all roles, including those meant for civilians, ruling via martial law through the guise of humanitarianism for 12 years, even after Kosovo declared independence.

Today, KFOR maintains a presence of over 5,000 troops. Perhaps this is justifiable in the eyes of the international community. After all, Kosovo’s parliament dissolved itself in 2010 after only two years. Their Prime Minister has been charged with organ smuggling from Serb prisoners of war and civilians during the conflict.
and the International Court of Justice is still wavering on Kosovo’s legitimacy, nonbindingly ruling their 2008 declaration of independence legal, but avoiding saying that the state of Kosovo was legal under international law. ICJ President Hisashi Owada said that international law contained no “prohibition on declarations of independence”\textsuperscript{68} and therefore Kosovo’s declaration “did not violate international law,”\textsuperscript{69} utterly sidestepping the vital question of whether Kosovo was in fact a sovereign nation, or a nation at all.

Yet KFOR is not the only, or even the worst, injustice visited by the international community upon Kosovo. The International Civilian Representative for Kosovo has the same absolute power as his Bosnian counterpart, with one notable exception. While Bosnia’s Valentin Inzko may enjoy the backing of the International Community, Kosovo’s Pieter Feith is backed by KFOR’s remaining 5,000 troops. The benefits of international disengagement and departure are no less significant in Kosovo than they are in Bosnia, and in fact in Kosovo it would be exponentially easier.

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The past pages of post-Yugoslav sovereignty concerns might seem excessive on top of everything that
came before on Serbia and Croatia and Vojvodina. But the cases of Kosovo and Bosnia are a special kind of non-sovereign, very much worth contemplating when we criticize modern sovereignty. Despite internal disputes over representation and secession, Bosnia’s borders are secure and nonporous, and its leaders are democratically elected. Sovereignty is fractured by an externally imposed governance structure and a foreign high representative with the final say in all matters. Kosovo deals with similar issues, as well as foreign military presence and questions of border controls still unanswered. When the international community, especially NATO and the OSCE, talk about Kosovo and Bosnia, they refer to them as fully sovereign states, but neither of them could truly be considered sovereign, nor even autonomous, by any honest assessment. They are colonies and the phrase sovereignty is used to ensure that interests aside from those in power don’t attempt to invade the NATO and OSCE sphere of influence. It’s a tactic employed just as effectively by the Russian state, and it is genuinely destructive to all players involved, expensive for the occupier, stymieing to the local economy and people, and ruinous to the regional cultures. So why, when state level sovereignty has shown itself to be such a flawed system, are other approaches to sovereignty looked down upon so fiercely by the international community?
Western double-dealing a century ago caused countless ethnic struggles. It has already been shown in the section titled “The CSCE” that the pastiche of sovereignty concerns and penal deception at the 1920 Treaty of Trianon\(^70\) bring a good deal of the blame for World War Two, the spread of Communism and authoritarianism throughout Eastern Europe in the 20th century, and millions dead and displaced, to the feet of the dominant western powers of France, Britain and the United States. The past century of strife might have been avoided or at least altered had the US establishment respected the study they had themselves commissioned in 1919, in which Professor Archibald Coolidge declared “To compel what has been since a thousand years a unified country to accept such an arrangement as permanent would be only to condemn it to a future hatred and strife with every probability of violent outbreak before many years have elapsed.”\(^71\) Certainly, borders should not be kept just for the sake of borders, but if borders are to be broken down and new ones erected, it should be both at the demand of the people and with the guarantee that travel between families divided by such new boundaries can remain unhindered and that trading routes shall not be broken down until new and equal-or-superior routes are in place. Without such conditions, poverty and conflict are all but guaranteed, as Coolidge prophesied. It is depressingly easy to explain why America’s
internationally-charged institutions play the games they play with the lives of the less fortunate, as we saw, again, in “The CSCE”, and as we will once more in the following discussion.

That the concept of self-determination could exist in a shape that is not a state should not be novel. Peace is not solely about securing truly autonomous units. Clearly-defined nation-states with agreed, convenient borders do not promote peace. It didn’t when the treaty of Westphalia divided Europe in 1668 purportedly to secure peace, nor did it in the 1990s when it all happened again.

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The Failed State Century

So far this book has focused almost exclusively on the issue of Yugoslav autonomy and conflict. Were this the only text you read on the issue of self-determination, or were you to stop here, you might think that Vojvodina and Yugoslavia were somehow special in this struggle. But Vojvodina is not special. Yugoslavia is not special. At minimum, half the countries in the world have strong self-determinist movements with stories very similar to those of the Daughters of Vojvodina. From the Kurds of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq to the Basque of France and Spain, from the Uyghurs of China to the Chechens of Russia,
from the First Nations of the USA to the Chiapas region of Mexico to the Quechua of Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Columbia, Vojvodina could not be said to be the most pressing or even the most interesting of these movements. This is merely the case study that this author had the fortune of living among for much of the past decade. The Yugoslav situation of governmental collapse is not particularly novel, nor even is the Vojvodinian situation of (that term I’m still not fully comfortable with) cultural genocide. For the former, one can easily look to the former Soviet states or throughout Africa. For the latter, one needs look no further than modern British and Spanish history. Our global system as it currently stands, the Westphalian order, may not be based on oppression and instability, but those are undeniably its primary byproducts. The modern world is testament to this, and the following chapters will build on the stories of the former Yugoslavia, of ethnic cleansing and international inaction in Vojvodina, and of genocide and the neocolonialism of “savior” institutions and nations in Bosnia and Kosovo, to show that this is not a regional problem but a globally systemic one.

Their own autonomists in fact find part of their leadership from a Vojvodinian, Branko Marinkovac, whose biography deserves its own book and who everyone, from Bolivia’s President Evo Morales to his polar opposites in the US State Department (according to Wikileaked diplomatic cables), views as a thorn in their side. (US Department of State & Wikileaks, 2008)
For evidence of the failure of Westphalian sovereignty, one need look no further than the late 20th century. The Cold War was itself the final battleground of Westphalia, with every transatlantic democratic institution claiming non-interference in the affairs of sovereign nations while secretly interfering, as the Soviet apparatus sought to absorb all neighboring areas and then defended those conquests by demanding from the world the same non-interference that the West had promised. Even after the fall of the Soviets, the same “sovereignty” defense of egregious human rights abuse is on-going by the governments in post-colonial successor states in the Southern hemisphere, claiming to use sovereignty itself as a protection against further intervention by the slavers and thieves of the governments of the global north. Sovereignty means to many of the regimes and peoples in former colonies the right to self-determination after centuries of European and then US oppression, but it is more often than not used in ways that are just as oppressive as the cast-off empires.

The Twentieth Century may be remembered as the Failed State Century. During this period, countless states that had succeeded for time immemorial began to crumble, new states shot up and crashed, the state model itself called into question. When the Soviets fell, the doctrine of non-intervention, already discarded in deed was now discarded in rhetoric as well. The post-Soviet
states and satellites were now a free-market free-for-all and spheres of influence were up for grabs. It would not be wholly inaccurate to describe the states of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, most of Africa and huge swathes of Latin America today as the maladjusted offspring of the truly miserable marriage of Josef Stalin and Ayn Rand. All the corruption and poverty of Stalinism, all the greed and mistrust of Atlas Shrugged, and all the unbridled hate and violent extremism of both.

In this time, there have been millions of deaths that could and should have been prevented, when humanitarian intervention would have been wholly justified were it not for the continued belief in fixed sovereignty, even of brand new states whose legitimacy had no foundation. 5,400,000 in the Congo, 800,000 in Rwanda, 800,000 in Somalia, 400,000 in Darfur, 250,000 in Liberia, 200,000 in Sierra Leone, around 150,000 in Chechnya, over 200,000 in Syria thus far, 100,000 in Algeria, 100,000 in Uganda, 25,000 in Libya… That excludes major international conflicts like Iraq or Afghanistan, and also excludes cartel-and-terror-oriented conflicts in places like Pakistan or Lebanon or Guatemala or Mexico or Yemen, even though fixed sovereignty has played a role in at least a million more deaths within those nations. More than eight million dead in the past 25 years, simply due to struggles for internal control in a fixed sovereign system.
In fact, the 20th century’s greatest state-building success is also the ideal non-Yugoslav illustration of the pitfalls of pure sovereignty. Though the issues are plentiful and there is more than enough blame to go around for the situation therein, pure sovereignty itself is at the center of the tragedy of Israel. It’s not worth going into the illegitimacy of the very concept of a “Jewish State” from either a religious or a cultural perspective, suffice to say there is nothing in Jewish theology to support such a state and Jewish culture lauds the people’s nomadic, stateless history. Nor is it worth exploring the fabrication of the identity “Palestinian,” suffice to say it has a similar creation story to Bosnia’s, but with much less time passing. The illegitimacy of everyone’s claims to historical or moral right is in fact secondary to the fact that sovereignty was granted to an invented country with no historical existence, a state against which all external complaints could only be expressed through war, while complaints from within could not be addressed at all, in that they were made by an Arendtian non-state people who paid no allegiance to the Hobbesian sovereign, and to whom the sovereign therefore owed no protection, especially not from the sovereign itself. 70 years of bloodshed and strife in “The Holy Land” are the direct result of the continued use of outmoded forms of sovereignty, and still this is the best case for the global order of sovereignty.
Now, this is not necessarily worse than what came before it. In *A Problem From Hell: America In The Age Of Genocide*, Samantha Power, a chief human rights adviser in the Obama administration, promotes the popular western view that genocide is somehow a recent phenomenon.\(^73\)

The very idea of an “age of genocide” is intellectually dishonest; pretty, moving words by a capable wordsmith to bend reality, or at least perceptions, to her agenda of western interventionism and NATO expansionism. Genocide is not a new problem. The Spaniards wiped out at least two entire civilizations\(^74\), who themselves were known for genocidal behavior.\(^75\) By official admission, the US’s own “Manifest Destiny” was an ethnic cleansing.\(^76\)

Empire is innately colonial, exploitative, and frequently genocidal. It is not possible, nor profitable, to expand into inhabited lands without at least one of these features, and empire and expansionism have existed for millennia. Samantha Power’s provocative title shows the kind of appeal to emotion with limited, one-sided facts cherry-picked to support her agenda that drives the entire text. But of course, it’s the same principle that guides the CSCE and their Legal Counsel’s point, that without bloodshed and drama, how can the CSCE convince its parent organization, the OSCE, to rally NATO troops and expand their own territorial and political influence? It’s a beautiful, subtle dance, but it is, in fact, baseless
propaganda. The world is no more terrible today, by sheer numbers, than it was before.

So those numbers above, the nearly nine million preventable deaths in what are widely seen as the most peaceful decades in modern history, aren’t necessarily worse than what had preceded them for centuries, if not millennia. Nor is it worse than its immediate predecessor, with 56 to 62 million “unnatural deaths” within the Soviet Union overall\(^77\), just shy of 60 million in communist China\(^78\), both unstoppable due to the excuse of fixed sovereignty.

But there are two major changes since then. The first is the efficiency with which states have learned to commit atrocities. The second, more important for this study, is the international will to end them. The philosophies that brought about the Nuremberg Trials at the end of World War II and that created the UN Declaration on Human Rights were revolutionary 70 years ago at their implementation. But today they are accepted not simply as laws but as common sense morality around the world. This, then, begs the question: why haven’t the leaders of our Great Power nations and their allies changed our interaction patterns to defend those principles and those lives?

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The Panopticon and the Myth of Sovereign Safety

Pure sovereignty protects governments that murder their own people from repercussions. The myth often used by those governments to maintain that purity is that a fracturing of sovereignty would compromise security and the state’s ability to protect its people. But the reality is that secret killings of dissidents and “threats” by foreign governments within the borders of sovereign nations is in no way rare. It is, in fact, almost the norm. The concept that pure sovereignty protects civilians and ensures peace is a myth disproven by 300 years of Westphalian wars and 60 years of peace within the European Union, strengthened by the borderless regime of the Schengen treaty. In actuality, pure sovereignty is potentially the greatest cause of preventable death in human history.

Human rights are arguably the most universal principle in Western politics. The rights to life, to liberty, to self-determination are the standards by which modern societies are judged. These remained revolutionary ideals when the American colonies declared them to be inalienable over two centuries ago, growing in prestige and clout until The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was heralded as the start of a new world morality in 1948. Yet it is questionable what good such purported universality does when, over the course of the

xxxix Though Hume and Rousseau had espoused them a half-century prior
75 years since the adoption of the Declaration by the General Assembly, there have been a minimum estimated 31,000,000 civilian deaths in atrocities that the international community failed to halt or prevent. More moderate statistics place the number near 80,000,000, with the high end doubling that. From Stalin’s USSR to Mao’s China to the Kims’ North Korea to Assad’s Syria, with Sudan and the Congo and Rwanda thrown in for good measure, pure sovereignty has been the go-to excuse for allowing the deaths of tens upon tens of millions of civilians. Often other factors do play a role, such as the cynical laziness of the CSCE’s calling the ethnic cleansing of Vojvodina “poor man’s entertainment,” but even that laziness ties into the sovereignty argument. After interviews with the Western military officials involved in choosing inaction in genocidal situations like Rwanda and general atrocities such as Syria show concerns over the sovereignty of the state to be a primary reason action was avoided, the idea of engaging in a sovereign nation is just viewed by modern international actors as an impossibility.

If the assumption that inalienable human rights are the core value of modern democracy is accepted, it should follow that national sovereignty in purportedly democratic states would be conditional on human rights. Supposedly, in this modern humanitarian era, if the sovereign does not infringe upon their people’s inalienable human rights, the international community agrees to
respect their sovereignty. Conversely, should they fail to respect their people’s right to self-determination, life and liberty, the community of states may revoke membership and act to protect the people.

And there have been certain advances in achieving this lofty set of guidelines by the international community. Many within what Robert Cooper, Director-General of External and Politico-Military Affairs for the Council of the European Union, refers to in his book *The Breaking of Nations* as post-modern states, concerned with higher international order and adherence to laws instead of directly-held power\(^{86}\), have come together to craft, in defense of those civilian populations under attack by their own sovereign rulers, the Responsibility To Protect\(^{87}\), a global norm outlining when international actors should step in and stop atrocities, even on sovereign soil, suggesting, if not codifying, sovereignty as a responsibility, not a right.

The Responsibility To Protect (R2P) was conceived by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001, when they released their eponymous report laying out the doctrine which can be summarized as: State responsibility for protecting the population from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing; international responsibility to help states meet this responsibility and; appropriate use of diplomatic and humanitarian means by
the international community to protect people from these crimes. States who fail in these responsibilities must be met with stronger measures, including the collective use of force through the UN Security Council.88

However this breakdown of classical sovereignty crumbles along two fault lines. Firstly, it is a last resort, requiring thousands of civilian deaths before action. Secondly, and significantly more importantly, it is a norm, not a law, and therefore has no power to compel action or alter sovereign power. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which itself began as a norm, is the basis upon which several enforceable laws, treaties, and International Criminal Court and European Court of Human Rights rulingsxl are founded. R2P is not likewise established, nor does it seem to be hardening from norm to law.89 The Responsibility To Protect is a valuable step in chipping away at Westphalian values, and in creating a framework to protect civilians instead of states, but comes woefully short of accomplishing anything. And, as one can see by the astonishingly high number of preventable deaths in the 75 years since the adoption of the Declaration by the General Assembly, between 31 and 160 million, something must be done.

However, what is interesting to observe is where those statistics are not coming from. Primarily, the

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Schengen zone, wherein sovereignty has broken down and autonomy is the norm. The Schengen treaty allows for borderless travel within its member states. It started with merely France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg and West Germany in 1985, but has since grown to contain 26 European countries that have wholly abolished any form of border control between one another. Travel is unrestricted within the zone, as largely is trade, and though there is some level of internal control in certain countries on non-domestic workers coming from other member states, Schengen itself constitutes a massive breakdown in the control against foreign workers. Most important, though, the Schengen zone is possibly the greatest voluntary breakdown of pure sovereignty by powerful states since Westphalia and has correlated with an absolute zero of state atrocities against their own civilians. Correlation is of course not causality, but citizens of the Schengen zone have enjoyed arguably the greatest freedom from government oppression in the history of the sovereign states. The spread of anti-Schengen sentiment throughout Europe shown in the 2014 EU elections with huge gains for fascists and xenophobes like the Golden Dawn in Greece, Front Nationale in France, the UK Independence Party in Britain and the Austrian and Dutch Freedom Parties is not just your everyday European racism, but an actual threat to the previous 30 years of peace. This specific breakdown in pure sovereignty has 222
saved lives and increased security, both economic and physical. However, sovereignty cannot simply be done away with, as the next chapter will show: it must be transitioned away from as with the EU.

Pure sovereignty and our interpretations and obsessions therewith are not the solution, they are the problem. Pure sovereignty did not keep Russia from invading Ukraine, it has not prevented the Mossad from assassinating Iranian scientists or the Israeli Defense Force from blowing up a weapons depot within Syria, and it certainly has not stopped the United States military from sending drones to bomb the tribal zones of Pakistan, all in clear violations of national sovereignty. What it has prevented, on the other hand, is any intervention against the regimes of these lands, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, Syria, in the all-too-common event of a government atrocity against their own people.

In the age of the internet, sovereignty was believed by many digital activists to be an outdated modality, with ideas spreading without borders. In the wake of the leaks of NSA and GCHQ spying by Edward Snowden, however, the individuality and privacy of the digital world have been understood as a mythical ideal, undone by the realities of nationalist spycraft. In his book on the leaks, journalist Glenn Greenwald, Snowden’s primary point of contact, describes just how broad the surveillance apparatus goes. This borderless, unlimited global
surveillance regime has been likened by Greenwald and others to a digital version of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a circular prison where the jailer sees all aspects of the prisoner’s life while the prisoner never knows whether the jailer is watching, thereby altering prisoner behavior through the knowledge that they could at any time be observed and punished. Bentham called his masterpiece “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example,”90 but he would himself be astonished by this digital version, a Panopticon in which all persons with online activity are the inmates. But where most critics who invoked the Panopticon do so in protest of state power, like Michel Foucault, the state itself should be wary of this. This apparatus was created in the name of national security (specifically by the agency of that name) and is propagated by all information on its functioning being for years prevented from publication by declaring a leak to be a threat to national security. National security itself is a protection of sovereignty, but the 50,000+ documents leaked by Snowden and explained within Greenwald’s 2014 book *Nowhere To Hide*91, show that in fact the agencies charged with the national security of the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Germany and at least 35 others as politically and geographically diverse as Israel and Jordan to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Croatia and Turkey to Taiwan and Singapore, have all been working with the
NSA to spy on one another’s citizens by working with and accessing the data of the world’s largest transnational technology firms including Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Yahoo!, Verizon, AT&T, Skype, YouTube and AOL, among others, in what is an even more significant breakdown in the principle of sovereignty than the European Union and the Schengen zone. In the prison of this Panopticon, every state is itself as much a prisoner as a jailer, constantly susceptible to the prying eyes of other state security apparatuses. It is additionally and ironically bad for physical security itself, as will be shown later on by the example of an unpredictable Turkish terror attack.

These leaks, the most important in the history of intelligence gathering, have had broad impact on the debate on freedom, but not always with positive results. Many states with an eye on quelling domestic dissidence have used this evidence of Anglophonic espionage to pursue a new policy of “cyber sovereignty,” creating a national internet to keep out the prying eyes of foreign agents. Unfortunately, what these leaders do not mention is the capacities this builds into their own domestic agencies to spy on their own citizens, as China’s closed internet allows for, and which Russia and many others hope to build. Edward Snowden has shown us that the internet is neither free nor secure, but the fight for internet security should go against oppressive regimes, not for them, and “cyber sovereignty” is yet another tool the state
pretends to use to safeguard citizens but instead uses to safeguard itself against those citizens.

Pure sovereignty is a lose-lose proposition for civilians, and not even good for states. It is only a lack of international imagination that keeps this broken system intact. But even back in 1999, Kofi Annan as head of the United Nations was defending a redefinition of sovereignty in the name of the principles of the United Nations Charter.

Nothing in the Charter precludes recognition that there are rights beyond borders. Indeed, its very letter and spirit are the affirmation of those fundamental human rights. In short, it is not the deficiencies of the Charter which have brought us to this juncture, but our difficulties in applying its principles to a new era; an era when strictly traditional notions of sovereignty can no longer do justice to the aspirations of peoples everywhere to attain their fundamental freedoms.\textsuperscript{92}

There are some very creative solutions already on the table, some of them good and some of them bad but all of them worth exploring in the pursuit of a free future.
Post-Westphalian Theories of Sovereignty

The ordering of the international community is flawed. It is narrow, oversimplified and dangerous. The lack of imagination in Western diplomacy and the adherence to a philosophy of sovereignty that is quite obviously inadequate, if not wholly incorrect, has crippled world peace and global freedom. The assumption that every single state in the world is sovereign and autonomous, the theory upon which much of international law and diplomacy are based, is faulty. Only the Great Powers have such autonomous sovereignty. Acting on such defined assumptions has proven fatal time and again, yet they remain the prevailing view.

There exist today a few alternatives to nation-state sovereignty. One is Nicholas Onuf’s proposition that laws are ever-changing, that they have not always been nor will they always be as they are today. This theory, relating to international structures, is evidenced by such unbelievable events as the collapse of sovereign, semi-Western functioning nations like Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was not eternal. Austria-Hungary was not eternal. Neither is the power structure of international order eternal. This, however, is barely an alternative in the practical sense, more a wistful musing of “it can’t last forever” and, more dangerously, an excuse for “wait and see” politics.
Another modern alternate theory of international structure is an expansion on Saskia Sassen’s “global city”\(^9\). States throughout history have come and gone, changing borders, rulers, and foundations. Cities, on the other hand, have been around much longer than nation-states and may provide a better unit of measurement and interaction in international relations. This concept is, in fact, an actual alternative, and could provide what Kuhn describes as a paradigm shift in how we view international relations, but as with many of Kuhn’s examples, this idea that will not be quick to catch on, requiring gradual long-term changes in attitudes to institute. We will not know that the paradigm has shifted until practitioners and students of International Relations are shocked that we ever viewed the nation-state as a reasonable unit. Major cities do show reduced signs of nationalism as compared to their rural neighbors, but this is not an alternative that will affect any current conflicts or international interactions. The city, however, is a vastly insufficient unit in the search for self-determination and autonomy, and in the field of International Relations itself. At the same time, the city is also an important tool for state order, allowing for close control by ruling regimes, with much of a peoples’ culture and heritage coming from the countryside. The city is at least as likely to repress the popular will as the wider state, as was seen in the era of the city-state\(^9\), but also again in Vojvodina, where 228
communists in Yugoslavia moved entire families from their farm into the cities to control them.

Perhaps, though, state sovereignty need not be done away with. A critical view of sovereignty is forced to recognize differing shades of sovereignty, based on the existence of a hierarchy in the international system and on the shifting nature and demographics of the modern state. In his aforementioned book The Breaking of Nations, Robert Cooper goes deeper, viewing the international community through a three-tiered lens. Briefly: pre-modern states are those without full control, without a monopoly on the use of force; modern states are those with significant self-interest and obsessions with sovereignty and balance of power; and the post-modern state concerns itself with higher international order, adherence to laws instead of directly-held power, and breaking down distinctions between domestic and foreign affairs.

Cooper compares the paradigm shift in global affairs that occurred in 1989 to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 “since 1989 is not a rearrangement of the old system but a new system”. This is a revolutionary, but well-argued, postulate: that the world entered a new global system and didn’t notice. The UN and the great powers still play the old game, but the board has changed, and so have the rules. This “new form of statehood” with states “behaving in a radically different way from the past”
requires the pursuit of a radically different approach in all aspects of international relations, an approach that allows for gradients within a very black and white system of sovereignty.

Yet shades of grey are not always visible to international actors, who seem to prefer working within strictly defined rules. This conflict between on the ground realities in nations with self-determining communities and the perceptions of strict sovereignty by Great Power actors results in a gridlocked system and endless conflict and strife.

Setting a legal precedent for self-determination and non-state sovereignty goes against great power interests. China and Russia are both dealing with self-determinist movements within their borders, and dealing with them brutally. So long as those two great powers sit on the Security Council with veto power over the whole UN, independence is a lost cause from the start. But as regards long-term world peace, we must be willing to look beyond conventional forms of sovereignty and recognition, beyond the independence binary.

There is a half-joke in Vojvodina, where one Vojvodinian man is telling another about a dream he had. “I had the most wonderful dream last night. I dreamt I was driving to Belgrade…” To which his friend replies “Bleck, Belgrade, what’s so wonderful about this dream?”
The punchline: “I had to bring my passport.”

Independence would be grand, perhaps ideal. But the people of Vojvodina, even the revolutionaries, are self-aware enough to know that this dream is predicated on another war with the notoriously brutal and unpredictable Serb war machine. The proddings of international institutions like the OSCE to “shit or get off the pot” and move from autonomy to sovereignty will only lead to bloodshed.

Hobbes was vastly oversimplified and functioning within the framework of eternal civil war. Rousseau was equally oversimplified but with far more optimistic faith in Christian doctrine. Onuf was correct, but as a theory, he is hopeful but impotent, giving us no modern tools with which to alter the cruel realities of fixed sovereignty. The problems with all of these theories is that they seek to be a literal paradigm shift in International Relations and do not focus on the transition period of “now” in which fixed sovereignty is killing and starving millions.

The most successful evolutions in fields outside of International Relations have come from those who continued to function within their existing fields. Muhammed Yunus created the miracle of microfinance by reexamining modern finance structures and shifting them to assist the greatest number and build non-Western wealth. Steve Jobs similarly reinvented the field of computer technology, as did Billy Beane with the Oakland
Athletics in fully revolutionizing the game of baseball. None of them created a new field or legitimately shifted the paradigm. To paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt, they did what they could with what they had where they were. Beane, Jobs and Yunus all have their critics, and rightly so, but whatever the morality and value of their re-envisioning, their impact on their respective fields cannot be overstated. Re-envisioning is often more valuable than reinventing. Why would this not also be the case in International Relations? The next chapters will focus on examples of nations and regions whose re-envisioning of sovereignty is working right now to change the whole of international relations.

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The Kill Box: The Consequences of Removing Sovereignty without Transition or Replacement

While we’re going about dismantling the sovereign system, let’s be careful not to repeat the same mistakes all modern revolutionaries\textsuperscript{xli} have made: failing to plan a replacement to the current regime, and failing to account for the transition period between overthrow and new government. The United States military has begun to do

\textsuperscript{xli} Except Tunisia’s, whose post-overthrow democracy has been surprisingly stable, despite terrorism and other difficulties
something similar with sovereignty, a breakdown without a replacement, and the results have already been tragic, but the long-term ramifications are truly horrific.

We must here borrow once more from French scholar Gregoire Chamayou’s *Drone Theory* on the theoretical groundings and implication of drone warfare. It is altogether a haunting read, but one chapter specifically effects the future, and in fact the present, of sovereignty. In his chapter titled “Kill Box,” Chamayou extrapolates on current US military strategy to lay out what has become a truly chilling breakdown in sovereignty.

With the concept of a “global war against terror,” armed violence has lost its traditional limits: indefinite in time, it is also indefinite in space\textsuperscript{100}. The whole world, it is said, is a battlefield. But it would probably be more accurate to call it a hunting ground. For if the scope of armed violence has now become global, it is because the imperatives of hunting demand it.

… Two distinct types of geography correspond to the two activities. Combat bursts out wherever opposing forces clash. Hunting, on the other hand, takes place wherever the prey goes. As a hunter state sees it, armed violence is no longer defined within the boundaries of a demarcated zone but simply by the presence of an enemy prey who, so to speak, carries with it its own little mobile zone of hostility.
In order to elude its pursuers, the prey endeavors to render itself undetectable or inaccessible. Now, inaccessibility is a matter not simply of the topography of the landscape... but also of the asperities of political geography. As the theorists of manhunting remind us, “borders are among the greatest allies” that a fugitive can have101...

What is emerging is the idea of an invasive power based not so much on the rights of conquest as on the rights of pursuit: a right of universal intrusion or encroachment that would authorize charging after the prey wherever it found refuge, thereby trampling underfoot the principle of territorial integrity classically attached to state sovereignty. According to such a concept, the sovereignty of other states becomes a contingent matter. Full enjoyment of that sovereignty is recognized only if those states take imperial tracking to heart. If they do not – ‘failed’ states cannot, ‘rogue’ states will not – their territories can legitimately be violated by a hunter state.102

Chamayou continues the chapter to explain what the hunter-state breakdown in sovereignty has begun to look like as technology becomes more precise:

In a memo addressed in 2005 to secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, the president of the RAND Corporation advised him that “a non-linear system of ‘kill boxes’ should be adopted, as technology permits,” for counter-insurgency operations.103 ... “Kill boxes can be sized for open terrain or urban warfare and opened or closed quickly in response to a dynamic military situation.”104
This twofold principle of intermittence and scalar modulation for the kill box is of capital importance: it makes it possible to envisage extending such a model beyond the zones of declared conflict. Depending on the contingencies of the moment, temporary lethal microcubes could be opened up anywhere in the world if an individual who qualifies as a legitimate target has been located there.

When American army strategists imagine what drones will be like in twenty-five years, they begin by getting an infographist to create a composite image of a typical Arab town, complete with mosque, other buildings, and palm trees. In the sky are what appear to be dragonflies, but they are actually nano-drones, autonomous robotic insects capable of marauding in a swarm and “navigating in increasingly confined spaces.”

With devices such as these, armed violence could be unleashed in tiny spaces, in microcubes of death. Rather than destroy an entire building in order to eliminate one individual, a miniaturized [sic] could be sent through a window, and the impact of the resulting explosion could be confined to one room or even one body. Your room or study could become a war zone.

Even before the advent of the micromachines of the future, drone partisans are already emphasizing the technological precision of their weapons. But the paradox is that they use this supposed gain in precision to extend the field of fire to take in the entire world. What we find here is a double movement that seizes upon the spatiolegal notion
of an armed conflict zone in a way that tends to dislocate it almost completely. The two principles of
this paradoxical dismemberment are the following:
(1) The zone of armed conflict, having been
fragmented into miniaturizable kill boxes,
tends ideally to be reduced to the body of the enemy
or prey. That is, his body becomes the battlefield.
This is the principle of precision or specification.
(2) In
order for the pursuit and surgical strikes to be


carried out, this mobile microspace must be able to
be aimed wherever necessary—so the whole world
becomes a hunting ground. That is the principle
of globalization or homogenization. According to the
military and the CIA, it is because we can aim at
our targets with precision that we can strike them
down wherever we choose, even outside any war
zone.
Similarly, a whole contingent of U.S. lawyers today
claim that the notion of a “zone of armed conflict”
should no longer be interpreted in a strictly
gerographic sense. That geocentric concept,
supposedly out of date, is now opposed to a target-
centered one that is attached to the bodies of the
enemy-prey. The conflict zone now “goes where
they go, irrespective of geography,” and “the
boundaries of the battlefield are not determined by
geopolitical lines but rather by the location of
participants in an armed conflict.”
One of their principal arguments, of a pragmatic
rather than legal nature, is borrowed directly from
the discourse of the American administration. The
geocentric interpretation of the laws of warfare
must be thrown overboard, they obediently insist,
because to extend it would in effect “create sanctuaries for terrorist organizations in any state . . . in which law enforcement is known to be ineffective.” But that argument, lurking beneath the semantic debate, also reveals what is at stake politically: it aims to justify the use of lethal policing powers regardless of borders.

… [O]ne of the problems is that the “legal logic through which the battlespace is extended beyond the declared zone of combat in Afghanistan is itself infinitely extendable.” By redefining the notion of armed conflict as a mobile place attached to the person of the enemy, one ends up, under cover of the laws of armed conflict, justifying the equivalent of a right to execute suspects anywhere in the world, even in zones of peace, illegally and without further procedures, one’s own citizens included.

Where will all this end? That is the question that the NGO Human Rights Watch put to Barack Obama in 2010: “The notion that the entire world is automatically by extension a battleground in which the laws of war are applicable is contrary to international law. How does the administration define the ‘global battlefield’ . . . ? Does it view the battlefield as global in a literal sense, allowing lethal force to be used, in accordance with the laws of war, against a suspected terrorist in an apartment in Paris, a shopping mall in London, or a bus station in Iowa City?” (p. 58)

Sovereignty is already dead, weakened by the world’s most powerful military empire, yet this breakdown of the sovereign system is not yet patched by a
replacement to protect either states or people. This intermediate period is the most dangerous situation, a social-Darwinian legal no-man’s-land where the worst of Hobbes’ nightmares is reality, a vacuum where only the strongest and most vicious survive, groups like the Islamic State, whose methods of consolidating sovereign power through beheadings and crucifixion and genocide we’ll observe in a later chapters. Sovereignty protects regimes, autonomy protects people and culture, and while the two seem mutually exclusive, a simultaneous breakdown of both, as is the state of affairs for half the world, is the worst possible scenario: insecurity without freedom, lawlessness without recourse.

US policymakers fail to recognize this death of sovereignty even as they’ve murdered it. American military hawks who trumpet both drone warfare and the absolute sovereignty of the United States would do well to recognize that the American hegemony will not last forever. There will come a day when the United States is barely even a superpower, let alone the superpower. There will come a day when another state creates a weapon that renders the entire US military useless, as the US military once did with the atomic bomb and continues to do with weapons like drones. On that day, a day before which John McCain will certainly have died of old age but perhaps Barack Obama will live to see, the American
establishment will wish they had built the proposals in the following chapters into international law.

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“... Now Let Them Enforce It…”: The Colonial Nature of Non-European Autonomy

There are many existing cases of national and ethnic actors re-envisioning sovereignty around the globe, but unfortunately they are more a lesson in which methods of autonomy to avoid than a salvationary model. The problem with evil is that is has a tendency to go along not with wisdom but with aggressive cleverness. Among the most evil systems to ever plague our world was colonialism. From the barbaric French and British to the brutal Ottomans, with the heinous Dutch and Spanish not to be forgotten, all the way to the contemporary but masked forms of colonial cruelty by the Soviets and Americans, the cleverness of colonialism means that, decades after casting off the yoke of that oppression, even a people who believe themselves freed are still functioning within a colonial systemic architecture. I do wish this study could be less Euro-centric, but unfortunately almost every example of autonomy within Africa and the Americas exists still within this colonial framework: autonomy granted to ungovernable and unprofitable
regions, called self-governance but in fact just a license to starve, cut off from the rest of the country and even from the temporary benefits of colonial aid. Bangui in the Central African Republic is the second worst city in the world in terms of standards of living\textsuperscript{xlii}, making their autonomy not a cultural kindness but a politically spun shirking of responsibility by a government incapable of governing. Ethiopia’s Special Woredas are similarly powerless, impoverished and ungovernable. And even in the European colony of the Mideast, one cannot give the 70 years of growing apartheid conditions of Israel a pass, no matter how autonomous or self-governing it may have labeled the occupied territories of Palestine and Gaza, but to delve into the ironies, excesses and deficiencies of the idea of a sovereign ethnoreligious “Jewish State” will yield no positive outcome, not least because it can simply never be done so well as Hannah Arendt’s 1953 \textit{Eichmann In Jerusalem}.\textsuperscript{105} The list of failed autonomous regions continues like this, a mesh of hypocrisy and legal permissions to starve.

In 2001, Professor Donna Lee Van Cott of the University of Kentucky published a study on “indigenous claims to politico-territorial autonomy” throughout Latin America.\textsuperscript{106} Her results were framed in a largely positive light, explaining the growth of autonomy claims in the

\textsuperscript{xlii} According to the Mercer 2014 Quality of Living Worldwide City Rankings

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context of the popularity of neoliberal economics and specifically privatization throughout Latin America. Out of 17 possible movements, though, she lists only five success stories in the region. Unfortunately for her results, in the intervening 13 years, much has changed and while two of her failure stories, Bolivia and Peru, have now codified indigenous autonomy in their constitutions, there is no sign of enforcement. Even more unfortunately, deeper digging shows that at least some of her success stories, such as regions in Colombia, Panama and Nicaragua, became autonomous in order to stop draining central government capital and those regions are suffering the same colonial autonomy as those examples listed above in Africa. Bolivia and Ecuador, however, deserve a bit more inspection after their recently overhauled national constitutions codified unprecedented degrees of regional and ethnic autonomy into law.\textsuperscript{xliii} 107

In the Constitucion Politica del Estado of the Plurinational State of Bolivia on 2009, indigenous autonomy is defined as

self-governance through the free determination of indigenous peoples, First Nations, and campesinos who share a territory, culture, history, language, and legal, political, social, and economic organization or institutions… Ratification of

\textsuperscript{xliii} One might be tempted to include Peru in this list, but their recently updated constitution gives autonomy mere lip service at best, according to sources such as the International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs.
indigenous, original, campesino autonomy shall be based on ancestral territories, currently inhabited by these peoples and nations, and the will of the population, expressed in consultation, in accordance with the Constitution and the law.

This codification, however, did not stop Bolivian President Evo Morales, the architect of this brilliant new constitution that houses respect for indigenous autonomy as a central tenet and overthrows decades of US imperialism and himself a member of the indigenous community, from ignoring his own work and his own people as he ran roughshod over indigenous rights, and in the face of massive popular protest and resistance, to build a new highway on indigenous land. This has led the Andean Information Network, in a very thorough review of Bolivia’s constitution, to declare “The existing legal framework is insufficient for the actualization of indigenous autonomy.”

Ecuador pays even closer attention to autonomy than Bolivia. In its Constitution, among the state’s primary duties is listed “Promoting equitable and mutually supportive development throughout the territory by building up the process of autonomies and decentralization.” In fact, the words “autonomy” or “autonomous” appear 108 times throughout the Constitution, though a few of these refer to the autonomy of government agencies. However, the section titled
“Territorial Organization of the State” describes the “decentralized autonomous governments” that “shall have political, administrative and financial autonomy and shall be governed by the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, inter-territorial equity, integration and public participation.” Among other things, Ecuador grants its indigenous groups collective intellectual property rights, as well as consultation in the use of their own resources. On the other hand, Ecuador has not a single elected indigenous representative in its government, and the indigenous have been at odds with the ruling regime for years. As an article in *Americas Quarterly* described in 2011:

[T]he Indigenous movement has been weakened by political miscalculations, internal divisions and conflicts with President Rafael Correa. An early attempt at collaboration between Correa and influential Indigenous leaders quickly turned acrimonious once an electoral alliance was rejected and Correa discovered that he could govern effectively without the political support of the main Indigenous organizations. Though the new constitution offers provisions for Indigenous self-governance and antidiscrimination, Correa has asserted greater control over Indigenous development and bilingual education agencies—ministries where Indigenous organizations previously had significant control. Ironically, the fortunes of Indigenous movements in Ecuador may have been better when conservative or neoliberal presidents were in power. In those
times, Indigenous movements were the main expression of frustration with neoliberalism. Now, when Correa expresses his anti-Washington Consensus views, the Indigenous movement finds that the president has stolen its thunder. Additionally, the turn to the Left has not reduced conflicts between the Ecuadorian state and Indigenous organizations, especially over mining activities and natural resource policies. The result is that the country is at a contradictory moment: the constitution embraces antidiscrimination, Indigenous self-governance and affirmative action, but the tense political climate is dampening prospects for Indigenous rights.\textsuperscript{111}

US President Andrew Jackson responded to the US Supreme Court’s decision that, according to the US Constitution, his treatment of Native Americans was illegal by famously declaring “[Chief Justice] John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it!”\textsuperscript{112} as he continued in his brutal ethnic cleansing of the nation. So it is with any Constitution, US, Bolivian, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Serbian: the words may be beautiful, holy even, but without the will to enforce the spirit of the law and to safeguard the autonomy of longstanding cultures and societies, they are just pretty words on high-grade paper and the same crimes against the subaltern will continue.

And speaking of indigenous autonomy and pretty words, despite the failings evident in the Latin American examples, indigenous autonomy seems an interesting
The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples sweepingly declares, among other things, that:

Indigenous Peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affair, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions... Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state.\(^{113}\)

This is a strong show of international support for indigenous autonomy. Unfortunately, it remains unsigned by four of the greatest oppressors of indigenous rights, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. This makes perhaps more sense when one recognizes that certain actions committed by these states, such as the forcible removal of indigenous children for the sake of assimilation, or the general act of genocide, are criminalized within the Declaration. While the Declaration itself is certainly a good start, just like the Bolivian constitution, it is unfortunately simply more toothless wordplay when veto-holding members of the UN Security Council like the USA can and do refuse to sign it.

This is not to say that non-European autonomist movements are unworthy of our attention. Never having
even the chance to interview representatives of the Gazans, the Tibetans or Uighurs of China, the Western Saharans of Morocco, the Chechens or the peoples of Nagorno-Karabakh in the Caucasus, or the Kurds of Iraq and Iran, academic study of their activities and accusations against their oppressor states show them fitting the same pattern as any other movement, with many of their struggles even more life-and-death than any herein. But continuing to study movements, no matter how worthy, is merely a further exploration of symptoms. What we need now is a discussion of the disease itself, and of its cure.

Unfortunately, even regions that semantically seem cured, those that have won their so-called autonomy, are in most cases only enjoying the placebo effect of colonial cleverness. Other autonomous regions and provinces, even outside the so-called Third World, continue along the same lines as those post-colonial autonomous regions, and must be outright ignored in a search for non-sovereign self-determination. As an apology for and answer to the aforementioned genocide perpetrated against the indigenous peoples of what is now the United States of America, for example, First Nations peoples or Native Americans enjoy an ill-defined extra-legal status in specifically designated “Indian Reservations” which make up a fragmented 2.3% of the United States’ total area. These areas are under tribal sovereignty with power over taxation and education, but due to the fractured nature of
powers, rights and territory, Native American self-determination leaves much to be desired as a model.\textsuperscript{114} The Soviet Union’s Jewish Autonomous Oblast was an example of using autonomy as a tool of state control, to isolate and neutralize a group perceived as a threat to state power\textsuperscript{115}, and Korea’s Jeju-Do is still too new an autonomous region to be considered in calculations.

Still more “autonomous regions” are really not autonomous at all. There are nearly three hundred regions in almost fifty countries around the world that are constitutionally referred to as autonomous. In the vast majority, this classification is mere lip service, an almost meaningless title in the name of political expedience. Very few of these regions have anything even approaching the level of decision-making and legislative power devolved to the constituent states within the United States of America’s federal system, and many of these, like those listed in the preceding paragraph, were given this autonomy not for the benefit of long-standing historical or ethnic reasons but because they were seen by the central state as ungovernable and unprofitable. Each of the aforementioned is a good example of bad autonomous policy, worthwhile for different exercises than this, deserving of some consideration as to which approaches to avoid.

Not all experiments with autonomous alternatives to full sovereignty have been failures, though. Hong Kong,
for example, has an exceptional degree of autonomy despite living under a notoriously standardizing and oppressive regime. Hong Kong came out of nearly two centuries as a capitalist British colony, run more as a business than a democracy, a history that is largely incompatible with its modern existence as a communist Chinese territory. Therefore, Hong Kong was granted a “high degree of autonomy as a special administrative region in all areas except defence and foreign affairs,” guaranteed by the Sino-British Joint Declaration to last for 50 years from the handover in 1997.

Hong Kong is able to maintain this autonomy, however only because it is beneficial to China. As one of the world’s busiest ports, the operational headquarters of one of the world’s major stock markets, and therefore a major center of banking capital, China can strip a great deal of economic benefit from Hong Kong’s state of limbo. And while this means that such a state exists only so long as it remains so beneficial to Beijing, it is at least for the time being a global boon that this autonomy exists. It was this autonomy that made them the perfect hiding place for Edward Snowden after his leaking of the aforementioned classified NSA documents on the global surveillance apparatus: he was untouchable by the United States because Hong Kong is officially within mainland China; but his abduction and the extraction of his information by the Chinese was also impeded by Hong Kong’s self-
governance. Their status is, for the moment, similar to sovereignty without the messy struggles for independence. Unfortunately, due to all of the factors and facets of its transition, Hong Kong’s successes are nearly impossible to attempt to replicate, and entirely contingent upon the whims of the central government in Beijing.

There is one distinctly interesting near-success in the Americas that could begin reshaping not just global views on sovereignty but on what it means to be autonomous as well: Chiapas. After centuries of oppression of the indigenous of this border region between today’s Mexico and Guatemala, the economic, ecological and political decisions of the Mexican state in the 1980s and ’90s, and especially the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, catalyzed a non-statist movement called the Zapatistas to take up arms and defend their own indigenous rights. One of the leaders of the Zapatistas, Subcommandante Marcos, made a declaration of intent that sounds an awful lot like that of the Vojvodinians, if a bit more willing to use violence:

"We, the men and women of the EZLN, full and free are conscious that the war that we have declared is a last resort, but also a just one. The dictators have been applying an undeclared

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xliv This made it much easier to pass the buck on responsibility for not handing Snowden over to US authorities as they demanded: Hong Kong blamed China, China blamed Hong Kong, and Snowden escaped to Russia (though escape is a strong word, as he’s now captive within an equally repressive security state).
genocidal war against our people for many years. Therefore we ask for your participation in and support of this plan that struggles for work, land housing, food, healthcare, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace. We declare that we will not stop fighting until the basic demands of our people have been met by forming a government of our country that is free and democratic."118

Chiapas created, through alternative methods of statecraft, though also through the threat of violence and through the small-scale use of violence against state structure, a long-term temporary autonomous zone that has achieved more of the Millenium Development Goals than many actual states with far fewer casualties per capita. The ideal form of government in the Zapatista view is “a political force that does not aim to take power, a force that is not a political party… a political force that can organize the demands and proposals of the citizens, so that those who govern, govern by obeying.” This all sounds, from a solely statist and conventional viewpoint, idealistic and doomed to failure, but this temporary autonomous zone has survived more than 20 years by throwing off the yoke of the colonially-imposed system of statehood and resorting back to indigenous self-governance practices as their Mayan ancestors had. For the purposes of the study of statecraft, treaties and constitutions, Chiapas may seem a nonviable example:
Free but isolated, Chiapas is stuck within a conflict zone, unrecognized in global affairs, and reliant on an indigenous cultural framework.

In rejecting Chiapas as a state or autonomous region, one of the primary theoretical and legal arguments comes from a century-old definition of territorial sovereignty. In a legal decision over ownership and sovereignty of the Island of Palmas, Swiss lawyer Max Huber defined the concept for the:

“Sovereignty in relation to a portion of the surface of the globe is the legal condition necessary for the inclusion of such portion in the territory of any particular state... Sovereignty in the relation between States signifies independence. Independence in regard to a portion of the globe is the right to exercise therein, to the exclusion of any other State, the functions of a State”\(^{119}\)

This definition is still used today, some 90 years later, to deny Chiapas’s statehood. The constant threat of both state and non-state actors undermining local power has caused the world to remain hesitant with granting Chiapas sovereign recognition, contradicting as such insecurity does Huber’s definition.

However, Chiapas’s place within a conflict zone does not differentiate it from dozens of other recognized states, and the need for self-defense within such a zone is no different than a national army. Similarly, its temporary
status of autonomous-but-not-sovereign non-statehood for 20 years shows more staying power than dozens more “failed states,” and in fact shows more that Chiapas has more claims to sovereignty than the Mexican government. While it may not show us how to write a constitution and gain international recognition, not necessarily meeting the definition of statehood put out by a long-dead Swiss lawyer, and while it is not the blueprint for casting out an ever-present genocidal conqueror, Chiapas can at least grant some of the more agriculturally and economically self-sufficient of the aforementioned movements a bit of inspiration as to what can be achieved aside from statehood.

In the next chapters, we’ll explore a few more regions, all of them European, or at least debatably so, from Britain to the Caucasus. These are the closest the world has today to autonomist success stories, but while they do not come from the global South, while they come, in fact, from lands of relative plenty, their autonomy could provide a model for future self-determinists worldwide. And a lesson or two on why autonomy is needed.

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The Soviet Breakaways

The reason a model for transitional autonomy is necessary, beyond human rights and self-determination speaking for themselves as the greater good, is shown in the post-Soviet breakaway republics of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdnistria. In each of these situations, as well as in Crimea in Ukraine, the Russian military has intervened, invading the sovereign territory of a recently-independent nation such as Georgia or Moldova in the name of providing ethnic Russians “security”. We’ll focus more on Crimea in a few sections, because Crimea had what the others lacked, fully-secured autonomy within their governing nation, making the Russian intervention even more ludicrous. But even in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it was a clear violation of international law. Russia has claimed that their intervention in each of these situations is based on the same principle of NATO intervention in Kosovo, supporting a nation’s desire for self-determination.\footnote{In none of these situations, however, was there evidence of a genocide, an ethnic cleansing, or even significant concern that such violence would break out. In fact, in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it was only after the Russian invasion that any ethnic cleansing}
occurred, with nearly the entire ethnic-Georgian population expelled into uncontested Georgia.\textsuperscript{xlv}

In Transdnistria, it remains disputed whether international law was broken, as the Russian invasion occurred in 1992, after the fall of the Soviet Union but before the secure establishment of national sovereignty or international law surrounding the newly emerging post-Soviet states, and following hundreds of deaths, thousands wounded, and over 100,000 left refugees in Transdnistria’s struggle for independence from Moldova. This civil war, as it were, began when the Popular Front of Moldova, the preeminent pro-Romanian Moldovan political party, called for armed militias to stop the people of Transdnistrian ethnic minorities from voting on a self-determination referendum, and the Moldovan police refused to step in and stop violence against ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Gagauz. These groups in turn created their own armed groups in the name of self-defense, a move that would have been wholly unnecessary had their autonomy been secure within the Moldovan state. As the United States Institute of Peace explains,

Combatants included local militia and Moldovan police, and eventually involved the newly formed Moldovan internal security troops, soldiers of the new Moldovan National Army and Transdniester

\textsuperscript{xlv} Though perhaps the NATO principle to which Russia was referring is that of using the ethnic cleansing and violence that was precipitated by the intervention force as an excuse, after the fact, of said intervention.
Guard, volunteers from Romania (with the Moldovans), and Cossack volunteers from Russia (with the Transdniesters). The Russian 14th Army, deployed on the Left Bank, remained officially neutral, but its members sympathized with the Transdniesters and provided them with arms.\textsuperscript{121}

In this case, Transdnistria, a nation recognized by a total of zero members of the United Nations, and only recognized by three other breakaway states, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, is still occupied by Russian forces, and Russia’s claims of protecting minority rights are not wholly without merit.

Which is more than can be said for two of the aforementioned breakaways, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, who, until Russia’s unilateral onslaught in 2008, were parts of the Republic of Georgia. Georgia declared independence from the USSR on April 9, 1991, but even before this South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia in 1990. Instead of pursuing a diplomatic approach, Georgia abolished South Ossetia’s autonomy and tried forcefully to quell South Ossetian independence, a technique that quickly led to a year and a half long war in which nearly 1,000 died, and another flare-up in 2004 in which dozens more perished. In Abkhazia, although the Georgians this time wisely attempted a power-sharing constitutional autonomy for the Abkhaz minority, much the same occurred as in South Ossetia, due to a misunderstanding by the Abkhazians that a changing of
constitutions was a loss of their self-determination instead of the gain it truly was. In July 1992, Abkhazia declared independence, but Georgia quickly quelled the movement with a mere 3,000 soldiers. The Abkhaz regrouped and recruited militant assistance from neighboring tribes in the post-Soviet Caucasus, as well as Russian paramilitaries, beginning a long and costly conflict.  

By the conflict’s end, both sides were accused by international monitors of gross human rights violations. The population of Abkhazia was cut in half, as nearly all Georgian residents were pushed out. After this war, much too late to do anything useful, Georgia designated Abkhazia an autonomous republic, and pretended to be in control for the next 14 years, until the Russian invasion in 2008. Unlike in Transdnistria, however, there can be no claim by Russia that the Abkhaz or the South Ossetians were oppressed by Georgia, not following such a violent ethnic cleansing by both as happened to the Georgian residents who had lived there for at least a century at that point. Still, this is exactly the defense Russia chose, and in August 2008, 10,000 Russian troops entered South Ossetia and 9,000 Russian troops entered Abkhazia and within two weeks had expelled all remaining Georgian officials and civilians. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have since been recognized as independent states by Nauru, Nicaragua, Russia, Venezuela and Tuvalu, while most of
the United Nations specifies them as Russian-occupied Georgian territory.\textsuperscript{123}

In all of these situations, the ethnic minorities within the countries constituted an ethnic majority in the breakaway region, giving Russia probable cause to invade in the name of protecting the minority. Without constitutionally-protected autonomy for ethnic minority regions within a nation-state, the recent Russian precedent of preemptive invasion in the name of protecting an ethnic group remains viable and possible for other nations to use as a pretext for war. The existence of constitutionally protected autonomy, as we’ll see in Ukraine, does not necessarily prevent such an invasion, but does weaken an external invader’s claims to righteousness or international support. Guaranteed regional autonomy is as good for a state as it is for the people.

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**Independence over Autonomy: A Tragic Choice in Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, and Kurdistan**

“I need your help.”

Those four words have a deeply powerful effect, eliciting a seemingly instinctive response from their recipient. Coming in as those words did via Skype from a Sri Lankan Tamil friend, that instinct led to my opening a
secure link to some of the most horrific pictures I’d ever seen, taken by the cheap camera on a Sri Lankan soldier’s phone, of the war crimes being committed upon the bodies of Tamil women. It happened all of a sudden: in one moment I was sipping a latte looking for something to pass the time, and the next moment I was transported into the horrific but largely ignored world of Sri Lankan war crimes. The pictures were followed by reports from the UN, the International Crisis Group, and Freedom From Torture, and then on-the-ground videos of the explosions of Sri Lankan bombs in the ongoing genocidal campaign against their Tamil subjects.

After years of repression under the majority Sinhalese population of the island nation of Sri Lanka, the Tamil minority began a fight for their own independent state in the north and east. As a response, the Sri Lankan government fought for over 25 years a genocidal conflict against the Tamils. In 2009, after tens of thousands of rapes and murders, with guilt on both sides, the war supposedly ended, in the slaughter of 40,000 Tamils. According to the data I was receiving\textsuperscript{xlvi}, however, the war crimes were far from over.

At this point, it was three years later, the summer of KONY 2012, during which evangelical Christian missionary group Invisible Children tried to harness the power of social media to organize an international response to the ongoing crimes of a Ugandan warlord.

\textsuperscript{xlvi} Backed up by well-respected international organizations such as the Committee Against Torture.
Over the next two weeks, my Tamil contact and I, with a group of other members of the Unrecognized Nations and Peoples’ Organization (UNPO) including some of the Sosas, worked to build on the KONY campaign’s seeming success to create a Tamil campaign showing that sometimes evil doesn’t have a face, but its victim has a body.

Over the next month, however, the newly formed Council on Transitional Justice (CTJ), as we called ourselves, expected to garner the support of a public shocked by the horrific acts of yet another state bent on destroying not just an autonomist movement but an entire people. What we met instead was a campaign of intimidation by the Sri Lankan population and supporters of their government against all Tamils in London who came out to support their brethren. After attacks on Tamils at two attempted events, the activists of the CTJ felt that the situation was hopeless and quickly went silent, to the great disappointment of the UNPO, but not to the surprise of the Sosas.

I met with one of the Sosas a month later in Northern Ireland, where we found shocking parallels to the Tamil tragedy. After the experience with the Tamil’s in London, and the sustained campaign of police harassment against another ex-Yugoslav woman by the far right London police\textsuperscript{124}, Britain’s capital was out of the question for our meeting. There was growing paranoia in the
movement, and my contact had no desire to be bugged in a nation with the highest number of security cameras in the world.xlvii. The average person in Britain is caught on camera more than 300 times per day\textsuperscript{125}, so visual was unavoidable, but if we could avoid having our conversations overheard, so much the better. We decided to combine business and tourism, but found ourselves quite bored by just how conventional Belfast was, until we stopped in to a fabric store for directions. The woman at the counter pointed to the map and told us “well, don't go here. It's not too bad, but they still throw rocks and petrol bombs in the streets. You know, kids’ stuff.” Naturally, for a post-Yugoslav dissident and her helper, that seemed a better fit.

Over the next few hours, as my contact filled me in on the failures of both the Daughters of Vojvodina and the Sosas to achieve even the slightest recognition, paralleling the CTJ, and on the region’s continued slide into Serbian totalitarian kleptocracy, we passed street after street of barbed wire and “peace lines,” murals and memorials to those dead in a long and bloody civil war, plaques on benches and walls naming the dead.

We took a free tour of the city’s underbelly and ended up escorted for the next three hours by a former Irish Republican Army soldier who had spent 17 years

\textsuperscript{xlvii} One and a half times as many as China, translated as one CCTV camera for every 11 people.

260
tortured in a British prison. Especially within this context, seeing what Northern Ireland’s attempt at freeing itself from Britain’s stranglehold through independence had brought, nearly 50,000 injured and 4,000 dead, made the prospect of anything greater than autonomy seem at least as dim for Vojvodina as the status quo. That night, I returned to my hotel to write up on my meetings, and was treated to the local “fireworks,” strange incendiaries that don’t look or sound like they were meant for simple spectacle falling from the sky, for much of the evening.

The next year, following a move to Berlin, Germany, the Western world’s little-known capital of privacy, free speech, and activism, the closest thing the transatlantic community has to an “opposite” of Britain’s surveillance state, I had arranged, after much hard work and gaining the trust of several local activists, a coveted meeting with a member of the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK). Kurdistan has been working peacefully for its independence from what is now Turkey for centuries, often making alliances with western states like the United States and Britain and finding themselves shocked when they were betrayed. Betrayed after being promised by those two Great Powers a nation of their own after the First World War. Their brothers betrayed again when the United States promised the Kurds of Iraq support if they rose up against Saddam Hussein in 1991. They then failed to deliver on that promise and watched as hundreds were
massacred. The PKK had grown tired of this game and begun in 1984 to fight an actual armed fight for independence, and had just signed, after 29 years, a peace accord with the Turkish state. The conflict had brought about the deaths of as many as 150,000 people and the displacement of nearly 3 million. The man I was to meet had spent the last three decades as a fighter in the PKK’s militant wing, the People’s Defense Force (HPG). He had spent many of those 29 years in prison and had seen many of his friends and family members killed in Turkish oppression. My interview with him was going to form the counterweight to Vojvodina, and in mid-June, 2013, I could not have been more excited to meet him after finally passing all the security checks and vouchsafes his handlers put together.

The week before, however, The Guardian newspaper had begun publishing Edward Snowden’s leaks on the scope of the NSA’s data collection, and their unbelievably wide reach into other national security agencies. The articles came first as a stream and then as a flood of information on the vastness and interconnectedness of the world’s intelligence-gathering services. The café in which I was to meet this man had been, I was later to find out, a favorite of another Turkish citizen who had taken his own life in a suicide bombing of the US embassy in Ankara.
three months before this scheduled meeting. Naively unaware of the delicate nature of this meeting and meetingplace, and of the impact the Snowden revelations might have upon my interview partner’s willingness to remain a source, I found myself genuinely offended when not only did the man never show up, but his handlers stopped answering their phones and the people who had connected me to the handlers in the first place pretended, when I complained, as though the connection had never taken place. They were absolutely in the right to do so, as it turned out. A scan using the Amnesty-International-supported and Electronic-Freedom-Frontier-assisted malware detection software known as Detekt showed my communications devices to be targeted by government-sponsored surveillance malware, though it did not specify precisely which government was responsible.

The caution of my Sosa connection to avoid London’s CCTV, of my Tamil connections in both sending material securely and sinking into the background, and of my Kurdish connection in severing all ties or evidence thereof, are more than reasonable: they are a necessary survival tactic. Revolution is a dangerous business, and revolutionaries in the modern era are forced by a panoptic global surveillance regime down one of two dangerous paths. The first is the path of paranoid purpose: they

xlvi Himself not a member of the PKK
continue to work collaboratively, as they had in days before iPhones and internets, using hand-written notes or typewriters or face-to-face meetings, studiously avoiding the trappings of the security state but continuing to fight as underdog brothers in arms against great evil. With this purpose, this path is far less damaging to all involved than the latter possibility: those who, like the bomber of the US embassy, are effected by the knowledge that they are always under surveillance and feel that the only method left to them to affect change is to act as a lone wolf and strike out without mitigating input from other like-minded revolutionaries or softening influences. In an era where peoples are crying out like never before for freedom, the sovereign-obsessed surveillance state has only increased the likelihood of unpredictable, seemingly-random terrorist strikes such as that which occurred in Ankara.

What is more the point, however, is that armed struggle in the quest for independence meets with the full force of not just the state whose power is challenged, but all powerful states. The PKK is recognized as a terror organization not just by Turkey but also by the USA, the EU, NATO, Australia, Canada, Japan, and even Iran. The IRA is recognized as terrorist by the UK and the US, but is also forbidden in Ireland. The Tamil Tigers, who were the primary force in the attempted liberation of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, are themselves registered as terrorists by not
just Sri Lanka but 31 other countries including Canada, India, the EU, the UK and the US. While tangential, it seems noteworthy that, while the US recognizes these violent movements aimed at undermining oppressive state power as terrorist organizations, violent extremists like the Ku Klux Klan who have repeatedly committed acts of terrorism against non-White citizens on US soil are still not recognized and targeted as terrorist organizations, despite the number of Americans killed in lynchings\textsuperscript{xliv} and other Klan activities being higher than the number of Americans killed in terror attacks.\textsuperscript{1} The reason for this inconsistency in state response is that Klan attacks are aimed only at people, not at state institutions. Not only is independence not the best way to ensure the continuity of a people: in the context of today’s international obsession with state sovereignty and power, the armed struggle for independence is the most surefire way to get one’s people slaughtered, sometimes even wiped out.

The breakup of Yugoslavia began with Kosovo’s quest in 1991 for independence instead of autonomy. While the factors that played into that situation descending into the genocidal chaos of the following eight years are numerous, Kosovo’s independence push was the catalyst, and thereby the catalyst for Vojvodina’s lost autonomy as Milosevic saw his opportunity to respond by

\textsuperscript{xliv} 4,700
\textsuperscript{1} Less than 4,000
consolidating control, a fact that the CSCE’s vulgar admonition disregards outright. In the case of Northern Ireland and the Sri Lankan Tamils, and even to a lesser extent in Kurdistan, parallels are evident.

In fact, in Turkish Kurdistan, the threat is renewed by the emergence and strengthening of the Kurdish region of Iraq: whispers have been heard of plans by the government of Turkey to ethnically cleanse their Kurds into Iraq, as Assad’s Syria had done with the Syrian Kurds, as the new ethnic-majority nation evolves in, and secedes from, Iraq. This ethnic cleansing, however, has not pushed the Kurds into statehood, but towards extinction.

The Yazidis, a non-Muslim subset of Kurds the majority of whom live in Iraq and Syria, have been threatened with genocide by the militant organization Islamic State (formerly Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, previously acronymed ISIS or ISIL, now simply IS) in a statist push that proves better than any other example, even than the powerful final example of Crimea, the violence inherent in the sovereign system. The group believes themselves to be a caliphate representing Muslims across the globe, and their name itself is the goal: a state, a pure ethnoreligious state, spreading across the Levant region, including Cyprus, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and some of Turkey, achieved, like any state, through armed struggle and bloodshed. While they claim to be borderless,
with their official spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani al-Shami declaring “Our goal is to establish an Islamic state that doesn’t recognize borders, on the Prophetic methodology,” the reality of their ideology does in fact permit border treaties, so long as each treaty is renegotiated after no more than ten years. Doctrine mandates a state of constant jihad, but that simply means the fight must continue, at least on a small scale, somewhere, not globally. Their means are brutal, but their goal is no different than the Manifest Destiny of the United States, than Russia’s ethnonationalist imperialism, than the Serbian world domination slogan “Serbia to Tokyo,” and on and on for the past 300 years.

In the second half of 2014, the world’s eyes finally turned, after a century, to Kurdistan, when the Kurds took the fight to IS. But the gaze was fixated not on the PKK, but on the YPJ, the female fighting brigade, the Kurdish equivalent of the Sosas, but with real military training, and a true threat to IS in Kurdish territory. They often serve alongside male fighters, as shown in the following letter from a YPJ fighter in the Kurdish town of Kobani (also written as Kobanê, also called Ayn al-Arab) to her mother was posted in October 2014:

I am fine mum. Yesterday we celebrated my 19th birthday. My friend Azad sang a beautiful song about mothers. I remembered you and cried. Azad has a beautiful voice, he
cried too when he was singing. He also missed his mother whom he has not seen for a year. Yesterday we helped a wounded friend. He got wounded by 2 bullets. He didn’t know much about the second wound when he was pointing to the first bullet in his chest. He was bleeding from his flank too, we bandaged his wound and I gave him my blood.

We are in the east side of Kobani, mother...A few miles only stand between us and them. We see their black flags, we listen to their radios, sometimes we don’t understand what they say when they speak foreign languages but we can tell they are scared. We are in a group of nine fighters. The youngest, Resho from Afrin. He fought in Tal Abyad then joined us. Alan is from Qamishlo, from their best neighborhood, he fought in Sere Kaniye then joined us. He has a few scars on his body. He tells us it is for Avin. The oldest is Dersim, he is from the Qandil Mountain, and his wife was martyred in Diyarbekir and left him with 2 kids. We are in a house on the outskirts of Kobani. We don’t know much about its owners. There are photos of an old man and one of a young man with a black ribbon, seems like he is a martyr...There is a photo of Qazi Mohamad, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Apo, and an old Ottoman map mentioning the name of Kurdistan. We have not got coffee for a while, we found out that life is beautiful even without coffee.
Honestly I’ve never had a coffee as good as yours mom. We are here to defend a peaceful city. We never took part in killing anyone, instead we hosted many wounded and refugees from our Syrian brothers. We are defending a Muslim city that has tens of mosques. We are defending it from the barbaric forces. Mother, I will visit you once this dirty war that was forced on us is over. I will be there with my friend Dersim who will go to Diyarbekir to meet his kids. We all miss home and want to go back to it, but this war does not know what missing means. Maybe I won’t come back mother. Then be sure that I dreamed of seeing you for so long but I was not lucky. I know that you will visit Kobani one day and look for the house that witnessed my last days…it is on the east side of Kobani. part of it damaged, it has a green door which has many holes from sniper shots and you will see 3 windows, one on the east side, you will see my name written there in red ink...Behind that window mother I waited counting my last moments watching the sun light as it penetrated my room from the bullet holes in that window.. Behind that window, Azad sang his last song about his mother, he had a beautiful voice when he was saying “mum I miss you”

MuM I MISS YOU

Your daughter, Narin

Within the same week, exposes on the YPJ were being published in every kind of outlet, from Kurdish
nationalist websites to magazines where you might not expect such political hot topics like *Marie Claire.* The *Marie Claire* expose, made up of reporting by photographer Erin Trieb, was peppered with quotes such as

“We have to be free from the Syrian government,” says YPJ member, Evin Ahmed, 26… She continues, “We need to control the area ourselves without depending on them. They can’t protect us from [ISIS], we have to protect us [and] we defend everyone…no matter what race or religion they are.

And

General Zelal, 33… one of the leaders of YPJ, expanded upon the idea of the independence the group brings women of the region: “I don’t want to get married or have children or be in the house all day. I want to be free. If I couldn’t be a YPJ I think my spirit would die. Being a YPJ soldier means being free—this is what it means to truly be free.”

An earlier, more political interview by Ersin Çaksu of *The Rojava Report*, a website that heralds itself “News from the Revolution in Rojava and Wider Kurdistan”, with the General Commander of the YPJ in the Kobanê Region, yielded quotes such as the following:

Women have a leading role in the construction of a democratic, egalitarian and moral-political society. Because women are the creators of a sense of
community. They are the main foundational element of society. Women’s role of fertility and patriotism is of paramount importance in society... When we first formed the YPJ here we had many difficulties. But after we founded it here Kobanê became the city with the most participation in the YPJ. The women of Kobanê have seen what will is able to become...

And

Families made problems... For example the concept of ‘deficient’ was stilling (sic) being used for women in Kobanê. This is a manifestation of the oppression faced by women in this society. There is still an understanding that women are a vehicle for producing children and a simple human made to do work at home... [T]hose who married at a young age, or were children brides, or were married to men much older than them are all here. Sometimes when I hear the stories of some of our fighters I am very shocked. In the 21st century the percentage of literacy among women continues to be very low. However with the start of the Rojava revolution it was women more than anyone else who participated. The effect of this was great. Many of our friends blew themselves up in order to avoid capture by ISIS. I should add that these were women who had been fighters for 3 or 4 months. They know that when they fighting against ISIS they are not fighting against just any force. Because the mentality of ISIS is a mentality of the slave period. They have never viewed women as human beings. In fact they believe that those killed by
women will not go to heaven. For example in fighting last year some of our friends made the suggestion that in order not to suffer excessive losses they should not remain on the forward position. But we as women went and held the forward front. Our male friends swallowed their pride and came back to their positions (laughing). I can say that women who have been oppressed here have developed a strong spirit. A profile of the warrior woman is emerging. We have no problem in fighting our enemies. The only problem is sometimes we go after our enemies too hard. An example: one of friends who had been in the war in Kandil for 3-4 months took off her shoes to attack because the ground was so muddy. This is an unwritten legend. It is something like the butterfly that goes right toward the fire. Because they have tasted freedom once. That is the women of the YPJ has tasted freedom. They know how to liberate themselves. This spirit has a major effects on the those around them. For example many people ask ‘why are the women going and we are not going?’ Here I wanted to speak to you about Martyr Agirî who fell in fighting in the village of Evdiko. She shocked the enemy by standing up facing a tank and opening fire. When her friends Erdal and Kendal were killed she gathered up all of their explosives and attacked a house where the enemy was positioned, where she blew herself up and was martyred. Her friends could not stop here (sic). She had been a fighter for four months…

The *International Business Times* also picked up the trend with a ten-page interview with another Kurdish
fighter, this time a woman named Bejan Ciyayi who had fought with the PKK for 16 years and then joined the YPJ to defend Kobani against IS. Her interview was much like the preceding piece, but it was also far more human, with Bejan making statements similar to Milos of Vojvodina on the subject of parenthood and a future in a hellhole, “I was never married; it seemed pointless to me to get married and bring a child to this world, before making it a nice place to live for children,” similar to Vesna on the skills that set women apart, “[o]ur female fighters are well trained in using all the weapons we possess… But women are best at using the Dragunov sniper rifle, because women are very good at taking aim. It requires calm, patience and finesse; women excel at these.” But what set this one apart from the General Commander’s interview was a focus on her views on statehood, autonomy and a Kurdish future, first calling Turkey to account for the attempted annihilation of the Kurds and implicit support for IS.

The Turkish state has made it an ambition to exterminate the Kurds. There is not a single alliance that it will refrain from in order to accomplish this ambition. There is a revolution in Rojava. The Turkish state is worried about this revolution spilling across its own borders. This is why IS is attacking Rojava and why the Turkish state is supporting their effort.

...
Regarding the future of Kurdistan, I have never dreamt of any state. Since childhood I have always been afraid of state institutions. I find them inhumane. I am glad that since 1999, our paradigm changed and we rid ourselves of for this burden. I do want a democratic homeland, however. And I hope for all countries in the world to shift from a nation-statist paradigm, to a democratic nation paradigm. The Kurds have never been a nationalist society, but they have always wanted their freedom. Of course it is natural for the Kurds to want to live freely in their country. However, this is a completely different thing from wanting to form a state. We don’t recognise these fake borders that have divided our country into four different states. Everyday, here in Kobani, there were children who used to go to the border to play with their cousins from Suruc. There are men in Qamishlo who fall in love with women from Nusaybin that is only a couple of hundred metres away but is divided with an ugly looking fence. Despite the Turkish state’s relentless attempts of assimilation, I never became a Turk. Otherwise, what would I be doing here today? For us there is no old or new life. I have devoted my life to my people, this will not change in times of peace. When the war is over, we will have a lot of building to do.

The interviews go on like this. Since my fateful failure with the PKK fighter, I had also built up a network of Kurdish contacts in Germany and attended their rallies in Berlin in order to garner some similar interviews.
This chapter could easily be as long as the whole of the preceding work with Vojvodina, and in fact they sound so similar to what one might imagine the Sosas and Daughters of Vojvodina would be saying if their struggle turned into a full-fledged conflict as to paint a very prophetic picture of a continuation of the status quo. So similar, in fact, that a glance at their histories shows that Woodrow Wilson and his cohort of World War One victors plays the same lying, backstabbing role against the Kurds that they played against Vojvodina. A second glance at the 1990s has the Kurds betrayed and left to die by the United States in the first Gulf War in a similar fashion to the nation of Vojvodina being forgotten and even destroyed in NATO’s bombardment of Serbia during the same time.

That paralleling story was, in fact, originally what this chapter looked like, but it is unnecessary when the journalists above have already undertaken these interviews, talking with real soldiers on the ground right now, much more compelling work than my own interviews with former fighters now retired in Europe, and the above quotes should be sufficient to get the point across: the female autonomist revolutionary, driven not by the desire to fight but the desire to see a normal life for their families, is a global phenomenon brought on by the oppression of the sovereign system. What’s more, the phenomenon of the female autonomist revolutionary traps
the supporters of pure sovereignty into an untenable moral conundrum: How can the state, whose sole purpose is to protect and serve its people, claim the moral high ground as it is documented murdering mothers and daughters who fight to protect and free their families? These women, be they in Kurdistan, Northern Irelandli, or in Vojvodina, are the greatest threat to oppressive state models in the information age as their stories are transmitted across the globe as quickly as they can be told.

But back to the question of autonomy itself, Ms. Ciyayi’s statements suggesting the Turkish government supports IS might have seemed excessive, almost to the point of discrediting her arguments. But in response to the attacks by IS on the border of Turkey in October 2014, only a town away from Kobani, the Turkish government finally roused its military and struck back... against the Kurdish soldiers fighting against IS on the Turkish border. The Turkish government was so afraid of the prospect of freedom and autonomy for the Kurds that instead of fighting against a clear and present threat from IS, they attacked their own last line of defense against a strong and fearsome enemy. Sadly, several more of the non-militant Kurdish citizens fleeing these bombings and the fighting in Kobani have been killed not by ISIS but by landmines laid by the Turkish government.131

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li As documented in Eileen Macdonald’s 1991 book Shoot The Women First,
Many might suggest that a strong independent Kurdistan could have prevented the IS threats, attacks, or even the movement itself. Yet Assad’s Syria was one of the strongest states in the region, and the puppet-state of post-Saddam-Hussein Iraq is as strong as the NATO forces therein, and neither have stopped IS’s progress. The ideal of the strong sovereign state with strong sovereign borders requires brutality for any form of social change, as true of the Islamic State as it is for Russia as it was for the Nazis as it will be of the next brutal ethnically-or-religiously-pure movement intent on changing borders.

In these four conflicts alone over 40 years’ time we’ve seen as many as a million deaths, hundreds of thousands of rapes and injuries, and over 10 million displaced people. Involving Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian Kurdistan would vastly elevate these numbers, especially considering the death count in the Syrian civil war and the conflict with IS.

In fact, this form of brutal conflict-oriented change-making is the force behind much of the current global refugee crisis. The war in Syria, with factions from both Islamic State and Kurdish independence groups, has resulted in over 4 million refugees. Another million Kurds

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iii If we are to be clear and honest, we might also include Israel’s excesses among the brutality of the sovereign state and remind ourselves that, according to a Jewish survivor of the concentration camp Theresienstadt quoted in Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann In Jerusalem, “Zionists, according to the Nazis, were ‘the <decent> Jews since they too thought in <national> terms.’” p. 60

iii Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Vojvodina and Turkish Kurdistan.
have become refugees through the conflict with Turkey. The equally brutal process of Zionist statehood and expansionism, as well as the attempted annihilation of the emerging Israeli state by neighboring countries, has created over 5 million Palestinian refugees through the same model of pure sovereignty and ethnic purity. Additionally, 800,000 Tamils, 330,000 post-Yugoslavs, and 900,000 Ukrainians, a conflict we will explore in the final chapter, have become refugees through the same type of sovereignty-based ethnic conflicts, yielding a minimum total of 12 million refugees. Certainly, pure ethnic sovereignty is not solely to blame for the refugee crisis, with non-ethnic-based conflicts, and even non-sovereignty-based conflicts, such as those in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq, turning millions more into refugees, but these 12 million additional refugees have pushed the global refugee situation from tragedy to crisis.

The necessity for such conflicts and movements themselves, and the crises that follow them, could be undermined by destabilizing the power of the idea and the ideal of sovereignty. By outlawing separatist and autonomist parties, states such as Britain and Turkey have significantly contributed to political violence and what they refer to as terrorism. Peace was possible, but by forbidding the involvement of opposition forces in the political process, a peaceful resolution like devolution was preempted, the independence-oriented activists were
forced underground and into extremism, and violence was all but mandated by state action. In the next chapter, we’ll see examples of what could have been through more autonomist processes.

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Autonomy within the European Union: Catalonia, South Tyrol and Scotland

Within the European Union, there exist over thirty ostensibly autonomous regions, though in most of these autonomy is little more than lip service. The three most major exceptions to this are Scotland within the United Kingdom, Catalonia within Spain, and South Tyrol within Italy.

Catalonia, a land of over 32,000 square kilometers with a population of just under seven and a half million people, a third larger than Vojvodina with almost four times the population, is Europe’s second-largest autonomous region. Its storied history is a bloody one under Francisco Franco’s fascist Spain, one of modern Europe’s longest-ruling and most brutal dictators. Outside of the urban population of Barcelona, largely comprised of Spanish migrants and international immigrants coming for work, the Catalan language is the predominant mode of communication, though when Barcelona is included,
Spanish comes out ahead 46% to 37%. During Franco’s rule, however, Catalan culture and language were harshly suppressed. In 1979, as Spain was attempting to become a democracy, certain levels of autonomy were returned, and the language and culture of the Catalan people, after more than 40 years of oppression, were once more permitted to flourish. Autonomy was expanded in 2006, and Catalonia was allowed their own police force and education was permitted in Catalan. However, since then Catalonia’s autonomy has been challenged by the rest of Spain and overturned as anything more than symbolic self-government on the most vital questions of justice and taxation. Linguistically, however, which is itself the largest difference between Spain and Catalonia, the region is truly free. Education, aside from basic daily Spanish lessons, is in Catalan, and all businesses are legally required to display information in Catalan, though there is no law requiring such a display in Spanish.

Since the overturning of full autonomy in 2010, according to the Spanish “Center for Sociological Investigations,” over 40% of Catalans favor independence and an additional 26% favor increased self-government. According to the Catalan “Center for the Study of Opinions,” a referendum would find over 55% of Catalans voting for independence and just under a quarter of them voting against it. In fact, in 2014, Catalonia held what it intended to be an independence referendum but under 280
Spanish law it was entirely non-binding and became merely a “participation process. What it showed, however, was that, of the 2,305,290 votes that were cast (around 40% of the population), 80.8% voted for a fully independent Catalan state, 10.1% voted for an autonomous state within a larger state, and only 4.5% voted against statehood of any kind.\textsuperscript{135} There comes a point where even the most repressive state cannot stop a movement, and Catalonia seems to be slowly cracking through Spain’s repression and promising an autonomous, or even independent, future.

A more promising and useful example of non-sovereign self-determination is South Tyrol in Italy. A region of 7,400 square kilometers with a population of around 512,000 people\textsuperscript{liv}, South Tyrol’s history is very similar to Vojvodina’s, having also been Austro-Hungarian until 1919 and having experienced similar state repressions against its historic residents. For almost 50 years, much like the situation in Catalonia, linguistic and economic repression was met with revolt, and diplomacy caused fluctuations in relations between the rulers and ruled. After steadily increased outbreaks of violence in the 1960s and ‘70s, the situation was taken up by the United Nations, and in 1972 South Tyrol was granted

\textsuperscript{liv} Over forty times the size and fourteen times the population of the sovereign European nation of Liechtenstein, but less than a quarter the size and just one-fourteenth the population of Catalonia, just for comparison.
unprecedented autonomy. South Tyrol keeps nearly 90% of tax revenues and enjoy great autonomy in the fields of health, education, welfare and transport infrastructure. Prior to the economic crisis in 2009, South Tyrol was among the most prosperous regions of Italy. There is little factual difference between the situation in South Tyrol and independence, but the nomenclature makes all the difference.

The 2,800-member South Tyrolean Freedom party, a neoliberal economic party with a conservative “family values” social platform, have campaigned since Kosovo’s independence in 2008 for their own sovereignty. In regional elections, the Freedom party won over 20,000 votes in 2013 with the slogan “Autonomy is not enough, we choose Freedom”. With 7% of South Tyrol’s voters supporting the party, and with South Tyrol Freedom having been born of a split from another, larger independence-oriented party who had given up the independence struggle the previous year, it seems that even South Tyrol’s residents see independence as a luxury, not a necessity.

The fact is that South Tyrol’s independence is, more than Scotland or Catalonia, really a semantic battle. Its autonomist success caused former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili to herald the region as a model for peaceful settlement of the conflicts in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia, evidence that the facade of rule is
sometimes more important than actually ruling, both to would-be revolutionaries and to would-be oppressive regimes.

The most impressive of autonomous regions, however, is Scotland. It’s not that Scotland’s autonomy is more impressive than South Tyrol’s. It’s the comparison of Scottish autonomy versus the devolved powers of the other English-controlled British regions of Wales and Northern Ireland that makes Scotland stand out. Scotland, at over 78,000 square kilometers and 5.3 million people, is Europe’s largest autonomist movement. While perhaps not as brutal as Catalonia’s treatment under Franco, Scotland’s history under the English monarchy was one of oppression, as was the norm for subservients to the British crown.

However, over the course of devolution, overseen by Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell (now Lord McConnell) in 1998, Scotland gained freedom to control for themselves matters of: agriculture, forestry and fisheries; education and training; environment; health and social services; housing; law and order (including the licensing of air weapons); local government; sport and the arts; tourism and economic development; and many aspects of transport. It should be noted, however, that this autonomy is conditional. The UK Parliament in Westminster still sets Scotland’s budget, the Scottish parliament at Holyrood simply gets to decide how much
of the money they receive from England goes to each of those government services and how to administer them. In addition, the UK government has maintained control over: benefits and social security; immigration; defense; foreign policy; employment; broadcasting; trade and industry; nuclear energy, oil, coal, gas and electricity; consumer rights; data protection; and the Constitution. On September 19, 2014, Scotland held a referendum on full independence. The UK in the run-up to the independence vote promised more powers will be devolved in the future. Scottish voters, while reasonably skeptical of promises from politicians, chose in a peaceful, free and fair election to stay a part of the United Kingdom. The autonomy they had already achieved was seen as sufficient to defend their culture and lifestyles.

The independence of Scotland is not unreasonable. The excesses of the British state under English rule are well documented (as in the Northern Irish example) and the Scottish people should be proud that they have cast off the chains of English oppression by peaceful means, and without resorting to the strict binary of independence versus oppression. Scotland is a powerful example of autonomy done right. More local control of trade, industry and energy would be ideal, of course, and seems negotiable. All things that defend and define Scottish culture, however, are protected under the current devolution regime. In fact, beyond cultural protections,
following Scotland’s decision to remain in the UK, the leadership of all major parties in British Parliament have vowed to give the Scottish parliament full control over all income tax raised within Scotland. Whether or not Scotland someday becomes independent is secondary to the lesson that Scotland has taught: regardless of whether autonomy is a transition stage or an endpoint, autonomy brings peace. In the context of Northern Ireland, as shown earlier, the difference is stark, and leads one easily to the conclusion of former-President Saakishvili as cited above.

It is worth mentioning, in the same context, that the backgrounds of Northern Ireland and Scotland within Great Britain are wildly different. Scotland became part of the British Crown when King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England, and despite many genocidal periods between throughout the histories of the two groups, the union between Scotland and England was mutual and consensual, at least among the elites and nobles. Whereas Northern Ireland is the last vestige of British colonialism on the island of Ireland, a tradition of oppression and genocide and starvation and torture dating back to Oliver Cromwell that has no history whatsoever of mutuality or consent. However, while providing an understanding of why violence and complete independence are appealing in Northern Ireland, this history does nothing to disprove the evidence, that more
has been accomplished through a peaceful push for autonomy than through a violent push for independence.

Jumping back to Spain, we can see a very similar comparison with the Basque people. Pretty much the exact same story can be told of the Basque, from Franco to overturned recent autonomy, as of Catalonia. It doesn’t seem to make sense to tell the same story twice, so at less than a quarter the land mass and less than a third the population, this text has spared its readers the Basque stories and data. However, the contrast should be made again between the success rates of violence and nonviolence. In the Basque region, the support for full independence was at 33%, increased autonomy at 32%, federalism at 31%, and negligible support for the status quo. However, as with the Kurdish, the residents of Northern Ireland, or the Tamils of Sri Lanka, the Basque have been pursuing violent means to accomplish these desired goals of their independence or autonomy. After years of conflict, the Basque attempted in 2008 a similar referendum to Catalonia’s 2014 vote, but it was struck down by the Spanish government, and the Spanish decision was upheld by the European Court of Human Rights. The Basque responded with a significant uptick in anti-state violence over the next two years. As it had been before, trains have been bombed, police have been attacked, and the result has been the harsh repression of the Basque people and the near-annihilation of the Basque
culture by Spain, with the support of the rest of the world’s governments in the War On Terror.

Today, South Tyrol and Catalonia are on the verge of voting for full independence, following Scotland’s example. It is impossible to tell at this point whether this will go well or poorly for them. What is certain, however, is that had they fought for full independence from the outset, they would absolutely have ended up like the residents of Northern Ireland, like the Kurds, like the Chechens, like the Tamils and like the Basque. That is to say, poor, bleeding out, with thousands upon thousands of casualties, while still under the thumb of oppressive central regimes hundreds of kilometers away. When a movement for self-determination uses force to achieve their means, they challenge the central government’s monopoly on violence, and that regime must prove to their public and to the ever-present enemies on their borders that they still maintain that monopoly. None of these cases have been awarded any level of self-rule, not in the 45 years since the Troubles for Northern Ireland, not in the 20 years since the First Chechen War with Russia. It is not that independence is not a noble goal, but recent history has proven any super-legal attempts to accomplish them to be not just ineffectual but ruinous for the movement.

There are times when independence is the only viable course, when autonomy is unattainable or
undermined and your life or culture is threatened. When every British and French colony fought for their independence, it was in the face of cultural annihilation and autonomy was not on the table. The struggle to throw off the yoke of Russian oppression, while even more impossible, was all the more necessary for cultural, linguistic and often existential survival. And while this was once the case for Scotland and South Tyrol, independence is not the only hope of their cultural survival today, though it remains a reasonable option in regions controlled by unpredictable and often oppressive states, as is a tendency in modern Spain and simply the way business is done in Serbia.

There is certainly precedent for autonomous regions evolving into full-fledged states. The breakup of the Soviet Union was as peaceful as it was because its constituent republics, despite being granted only titular autonomy in the actual running of the state, were theoretically considered equal members with the rights of self-governance and therefore able to dissolve into those units. The only reason this did not work in the former Yugoslavia was that the state refused to admit that it was dissolving. In the unlikely event of the fall of either China or the United States of America, these are likely the same lines of dissolution we’ll see. But even aside from the actual crumbling of a state, autonomy is seen by many, as with those in Vojvodina, as an intermediate step on the 288
path to nationhood. But this perspective remains rooted in a system of absolute, all-or-nothing sovereignty, a system whose failings we’ve observed through the course of this work.

Naturally, the point of this book is the support of self-determination for all peoples that so desire it. Yet some situations certainly present stronger cases than others for the need for autonomy. South Tyrol of the 1960s was one such case, Catalonia under Franco’s Spain was another. But to push further in these ethnically homogeneous places, as in Scotland, the claims of modern oppression do begin to sound motivated more by classist or ethnic supremacist distinctions than by human rights. More to the point of this text, however, those independence activists in communities with great existing autonomy where existence is not threatened are propagating the same toxic system of division as their oppressors.

The idea of the nation as a biological entity made up of like people necessitates the “ancient ethnic hatreds” narrative as a means of othering and leads to either the forced assimilation or the forced excision of non-like people. Those groups who push for the independence of their own like community when they are not under threat of annihilation or assimilation are playing that same racial

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iv wealthy regions unwilling to pay taxes to support poorer regions
game. Self-determination is a noble goal under any and all circumstances. However, the best path to that goal is autonomy, not independence, if we are to pursue self-determination for all, and not just for the ethnic majority of a region.

Heterogeneous lands like Vojvodina, mixed communities seeking the freedom to remain diverse under regimes of ethnic nationalism, these are often the hardest places to secure autonomous powers of language and culture, and the most important - which brings us to our final tragic example.

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Crimea

The Ukrainian region of Crimea, a 26,000 square kilometer peninsula with a population of just under two million citizens of three major ethnic groups and a half dozen smaller minorities, was for years among the most important autonomist regions in this study, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2014 invasion of Crimea is, for an Autonomist idealist, perhaps even more tragic than the forced ethnic unmixing and quiet ethnic cleansing of Vojvodina. Crimea, more so than any other example, was a showcase of multiethnic regional autonomy functioning within the confines of national sovereignty, the state
slowly but regularly devolving central powers to the regional government, an excellent example of the aforementioned transition period between nation-state sovereignty and the age of autonomy.

While 58% of Crimea is Russian, they have coexisted under the Ukrainian state since the fall of the Soviet Union with their neighbors, 24% Ukrainians, 12% Tatars, and the other 6% an impressive Slavic/Caucasian mix, more peacefully even than the ethnic groups of Vojvodina. Despite a remarkably high unemployment rate for the Tatar population, the indigenous group of Crimea who had been deported en masse by Josef Stalin and were only permitted to return in 1989, the handling of ethnic tensions and economic frailty had been almost entirely without violent incident. It was in no way a perfect situation, but by granting Crimea’s autonomy in the Ukrainian constitution, the region’s three major groups all had their languages represented as official languages in government, education and daily life, and the people had for a generation coexisted safely in peace.

As Oxford scholar Dr. Gwendollyn Sasse explains, Crimea almost became the next Yugoslavia in the early ‘90s.

Two unilateral Crimean constitutions in 1992, envisaging different degrees of autonomy, galvanized the regional Russian movement... Crimean separatism peaked in 1994 and led to a
brief moment when Kiev lost control over regional politics and security. This void, however, was not filled by Russia or Russia-supported actors. The ‘Autonomous Republic of Crimea’ was eventually embedded in the new Ukrainian state constitution of 1996, and its final outlook spelled out in the Crimean constitution of 1998.\textsuperscript{140}

It took six years of tension, but without conflict the region’s autonomy was secure and war was averted because of it.

The Crimean constitution was a far weaker form of autonomy than South Tyrol’s, with the parliament officially labeled a ‘representative assembly’ which could not pass full laws without approval from Kiev and the Ukrainian Constitutional Court. Crimea’s prime minister, too, had to be approved by Kiev, with an additional special representative, similar but with less power than the Bosnian High Representative, also appointed by Kiev. This was more than symbolic autonomy, though less than enough, but increased autonomy has been a major political issue in elections since the beginning, and much like Scotland, autonomy was increasing. It was not full autonomy by any means, but the culture and language of each ethnic group was protected, and local taxes were used locally, even better than what Catalonia was permitted, and far better than anything seen in Vojvodina or in the Soviet breakaways. This had kept the region out of an ethnic cleansing or a full-on war. Unlike in Catalonia.
and Scotland, Crimea also had not suffered the agitations of ethnic nationalists towards independence, except for weak displays by Russian-state-sponsored agents.

However, when the Ukrainian government was toppled by protestors in late February 2014, Russia saw another chance, similar to their incursion into South Ossetia, to reassert their influence in the region in the name of protecting ethnic Russians. The signal of weakness from Kiev was all the proof they needed to claim that those Russians were at risk. On February 28, Russia began the deployment of parts of the Russian Army’s 76th Airborne Division, 31st Airborne Brigade, 1st Battalion Vostok\textsuperscript{lv}, 810th Marine Brigade from the Black Sea Fleet\textsuperscript{141}, 22nd Spetsnaz Brigade\textsuperscript{lvii}, 45th Spetsnaz Regiment\textsuperscript{lviii}, and a spate of unidentified militants into Crimea. The force of well over 25,000 soldiers was claimed by Russia as a protection of ethnic minorities against reactionaries, nationalists and anti-Semites, a claim rebutted by the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, calling it “the

\textsuperscript{lv} Whose record in Chechnya is grim (see http://charter97.org/ed/news/2014/3/5/89262/)


\textsuperscript{lviii} In case you thought this was some kind of a joke... (see: Jones, Sam. [2014, August 8]). Photos and roses for GRU’s ‘spetznaz’ casualties. Retrieved from Financial Times: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/f28913f6-1d8f-11e4-8f0c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3dXHtHkfV)
same the Nazis did when they wanted to go into Austria and created provocations”.

Reports from the ethnic Russian majority denouncing Putin’s invasion show just how weak the nationalists truly were. “We, the Russophone writers of Kharkiv,” wrote one early on in the invasion, “are citizens of Ukraine, and we require no protection by another state. We do not want any nation bringing its troops into our city and our country under the pretense of defending our interests, endangering the lives of our friends and loved ones.” And while there were, in fact, calls to Putin’s Russia for help from Crimean Russians, the main source of these was actually Sergei Aksyonov, the head of Crimea’s main pro-Russia party, who was coronated as Prime Minister by the Crimean parliament on March 1, 2014, after pro-Russia gunmen seized the building. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone willing to call Aksyonov a democratic representative of Crimea. This did not particularly matter to Aksyonov, whose illegitimate government of armed usurpers held, on March 16, 2014, a referendum on Crimea joining Russia in which, he claims, there were 83% turnout and 96.77% support for union with Russia, and which was found wholly unfree and unfair not just by western observers but even to former advisers to President Putin like Andrey Illarianov who called the referendum “grossly rigged falsification” and “cynically distorted” and put the number supporting
union at closer to 34%. Yet, just as Aksyonov’s illegitimacy did not stop his taking power, the referendum’s illegitimacy did not stop Putin from fast-tracking legislation in the Duma to allow this annexation to happen. However, even members of Putin’s own cabinet recognize the flimsiness of the whole situation, as Reuters reported “members of Putin’s own human rights council urged him on Sunday not to invade Ukraine, saying threats faced by Russians there were not severe enough to justify sending in troops.”

Crimean autonomy was not strong enough, giving too much power to oppress to the central Ukrainian government, and the region was simply lucky that Kiev chose not to abuse this. However, the existence of such an autonomy, as explained by Dr. Sasse, allowed this multiethnic, multireligious, multilingual entity to function peacefully for over 20 years under the shaky Ukrainian state, unbothered by internal strife. It could have survived the fall of the Ukrainian state with its own regional government. As opposed to claims by Russian state propaganda, there was no upsurge in ethnic violence, except by those Russian forces who seized the government building by force to appoint their top man as leader. But perhaps this perfection is exactly the reason it could not be allowed by Putin’s Russia to survive, the same as Vojvodina within Post-Yugoslav Serbia.
It would be unbelievably cynical and insensitive to say that this text is benefitted by the eruption of civil war and semi-state violence in two of its strongest case studies. The world is losing its multicultural societies at an alarming rate, and every aspect of this text is a call to halt this cultural erosion. These cases are simply some of the most vibrant and most threatened examples, who have for decades maintained their coexistence better than most other regions despite being surrounded by strong ethnonationalism at every border. What could be said, however, is that points regarding the importance of autonomy and the dangers of the idealization of sovereignty are certainly strengthened by events in Crimea and in Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan in 2014.

The challenge to great power sovereignty presented by Crimean, Ossetian, Vojvodinian, Scottish, Chechen or any other autonomy is not something that great powers, especially Russia but also Britain, America and China, can abide and still hold on to their framework and their spoils of war. This is why Scotland was pressed by allies to take an independence-or-nothing view of their own sovereignty, as the Legal Counsel of the CSCE put it regarding Vojvodina “shit or get off the pot,” and vote for full independence. But perhaps Crimea, in the wake of Russia’s overstep, actually invading a sovereign nation to violently seize a self-governing province who had never asked for help, can also serve, in its destruction, as an
example of just how vital autonomy is to national security in our new era. Even if the concept of nation-states does not die away, governments will continue to collapse, as they did in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia in 1991, in Afghanistan and Somalia in 1992, and continually all the way through to the Arab Spring in 2011 with collapsing regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In fact, between the fall of the Soviet Union and the fall of Yanukovich’s Ukraine, there have been no less than thirty state collapses. In at least half of these cases, a foreign power has stepped in in the name of “security” or “safety. As in the cases of Transdnistria, Bosnia, Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, at least ten of these nations have yet to regain real sovereignty. Even for a larger nation-state with a central system, building regional autonomy into a national constitution makes practical sense to maintain territorial sovereignty and avoid a power grab like Putin’s in Crimea or NATO’s and the EU’s in the Balkans. Maybe, just maybe, Putin will have taught the other great powers that this transition state of autonomy is not so evil as they’d thought.
Conclusion: The Age of Autonomy

Multi-ethnic cities were especially targeted. The chief enemy... was common life, coexistence... Living proof that people of different societies living together in one city, working together, that went against the nationalist propaganda that tried to present ethnic communities forced to live together against their wills, torn apart by ancient ethnic hatreds. Therefore, in order to match reality to rhetoric, orders were given to the Christian soldiers that “It [was] not enough to cleanse Mostar of the Muslims ... the relics must also be destroyed”.¹⁴⁷

Gordana Susa’s quote appeared at the start and at the midpoint of this text, and it reoccurs here in our conclusion because it is among the most perfectly illustrative of our system. It is not just Milosevic who is guilty of dividing and purifying. In fact, Sloba was just playing our game. Our binary approach to sovereignty, all or nothing, doesn’t just reward ethnic cleansing: it all but mandates it. “Shit or get off the pot” was just the beginning. By ensuring that autonomy is unrecognized, we convince minorities that they need their own sovereign nation for protection. When this new ethnic nation is built, the preexisting oppressive state sees their opportunity to do away with pluralism once and for all and ethnically cleanses the minority into the new state. So we have seen
with the Hungarian and Croatian citizens of Vojvodina, so we are hearing hints of from Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan as Iraqi Kurdistan evolves, so we saw decades ago in Indonesia’s purging of the Chinese. Pure ethnic sovereignty and ethnic cleansing are barely a step removed from one another.

It is fine, important even, for academics to continue exploring interesting long-shot and long-term theories of alternative sovereignties. Such a groundbreaking visage of a new system of non-sovereign autonomy, beyond sovereign states, and within the international system, could change the world. Yet perhaps it’s worth considering that such a systemic overthrow is unnecessary. To find a successful realistic contemporary solution, it behooves us not to swing to extremes, from full fixed sovereignty to non-statism. It seems that, given that key Georgian insight into the pride of rulers in the principle of calling themselves rulers, there can be true popular sovereignty without full national emancipation, so long as it is properly framed.

Given that full national emancipation rarely actually produces desired results such as true popular sovereignty, and even more rarely can be achieved without vast bloodshed, an ideal autonomous middle ground that does not yield conflict and allows for the maintenance of cultural and economic sovereignty is attainable, though the policies cannot be uniform as there
are vast differences between emancipatory movements. Viewing the evolution of sovereignty, the state, and human rights, we have seen the alternative proposals, explored their challenges, and hypothesized their potential failures and successes. It does seem, from South Tyrol’s success within Italy, from Hong Kong’s within China, and from Scotland’s within the United Kingdom, that the principle of self-determination can exist within the borders of another state.

We have also seen that, for the security of the state itself, it is wise to allow it. As new states arise out of collapsing regimes, they may begin to learn the lessons of their invaded forbears and build in linguistic and cultural autonomy for their minority regions. And it does seem, in the precise ways the world is breaking apart, that both people and governments are beginning to understand this. If this observation is correct, and if we are just incredibly lucky, the Age of Autonomy may be upon us.

Every paradigm shift is preceded by a period of intense global discomfort only later recognized as necessary and leading toward it. The Treaty of Westphalia and thus the age of modern state sovereignty was precipitated by seemingly interminable broad-ranging conflict in the Thirty Years War. The era of massive nation-state democracy was precipitated by bloody insurgencies against, and even bloodier counter-insurgencies for, the excesses and exploitations of colonialism and imperialism.
The United Nations and the global community was precipitated by the World Wars. This autonomist period, merely the next global paradigm, will have been precipitated by the discomfort of a non-polar world and the spate of independence movements following the fall of the USSR, culminating in the Arab Spring.

There was no logical reason, truly, behind the breakup of Czechoslovakia, caught up in the waves of state-based nationalism that followed the Soviet fall. But that Velvet Divorce painted a false picture of statehood, the single European exception to the rule that states are inevitably founded in blood. Because we still functioned within the state paradigm, Yugoslavia’s breakup had no choice but bloodiness. There is no other way to found a state. When Montenegro became the last nation to leave 15 years later, it was with Serbia’s bloodless resignation to the fact that there was simply no holding it. Ireland’s independence was a bloody mess, and functioning still within the context of nation-states, the fight for Northern Ireland reduced both the British and the Irish to vicious animals, British claims to civilized superiority notwithstanding. But other members of that United Kingdom found alternative ways to accomplish the goals of self-determination without the Irish cost of life and limb, as in the situation of the Scots. And it’s not over. In Vojvodina, in Kurdistan, in Sri Lanka, throughout Africa
and the Caucasus, this fatal paradigm continues to cost lives around the globe.

The fixed sovereign model is deadly, and no systemic solution is the answer. It’s not a problem of globalization, of capitalism or of fascism or of communism or even of militarism. It is a matter of an old paradigm of central control being incompatible with the new open-source paradigm of our interconnected world. And the transition from one to the other has happened faster than imaginable, in the instantaneous manner only possible in our digital era. However, the conservative nature of the state means that, as we’ve seen in the previous case studies, this transition is a confusing and violent one. But where this transition is different than in previous paradigm shifts is in the world’s ability to mitigate the damage. So long as today’s sitting leaders and their transitional successors maintain their control in name and in the eyes of the world, then they are willing to allow autonomy to blossom. So it was in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so it was under Tito in Yugoslavia, so it was under Saakishviili in Georgia, so it was under Andreotti in Italy to allow for South Tirol, so it is in British Scotland and Chinese Hong Kong.

On the other hand, so long as pure sovereignty reigns supreme in our global imagination, atrocities and human rights violations will continue to be ignored and allowed in great powers and their allies. Quietly, with
almost no recognition in local or global press, and equally undocumented within international institutions charged with their prevention, ethnic cleansings, repressions, massacres, and all-out genocides are the rule and not the exception in sovereignty-obsessed Russia and China, and in their allies and satellites in Belarus, Iran, Serbia, Sudan, Syria, North Korea, the old Soviet breakaways and the emerging breakaways of eastern Ukraine.

Of course, it’s not just these states that benefit at the expense of their peoples from a Great Power benefactor and an obsession with pure Sovereignty. Noted economist and media analyst Edward Herman takes to task the American politicians skillfully manipulating this system.

We are living in the Kafka era, when major genocidists and their friends and allies can get very passionate and even win Pulitzer Prizes for their denunciation of some genocides and ‘problems from hell’ while actually facilitating, ignoring and apologizing for others. Worthy genocides are those mass killings carried out by... U.S. enemies and targets, and they receive great attention and elicit much passion; the unworthy ones are carried out by the United States or one of its client states, and they receive little attention or indignation and are not labeled genocides, even where the scale of killings greatly exceeds those so designated, obviously based on political utility.149

US allies in the Global War On Terror (or whatever it’s being called today) are also protected from
intervention, from the aforementioned Turkish ethnic cleansing of the Kurds into the newly forming Iraqi Kurdish state to the torture regime of Uzbekistan, with the US calling “Sovereignty!” anytime these oppressors are called to account. The American establishment is at least as unimaginative as any other Great Power, as the CSCE and their Legal Counsel so honestly explained. The same mix of cynical political calculation and sheer laziness that brought her to command the Vojvodinians to “shit or get off the pot” pulled the question “If we use the word genocide, and are seen as doing nothing, what will be the effect on the November election?” from the lips of former US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, currently one of the highest-ranking members of the Obama administration, during her tenure as Assistant Secretary of State on African Affairs for Bill Clinton in 1994. While the clearest quotes on the subject are from high-ranking Democrats like the CSCE’s Legal Counsel or Secretary Rice, it is certainly not just Democrats, or even Americans. Republican US Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush, as well as British Prime Ministers Blair (Labour) and Cameron (Conservative) are all famous for this toxic strategy that is the status quo for Great Power diplomacy, a game of power, as the name implies, and therefore of politics not of principle, and a game which, as shown, plays right into
the hands of Russia and China and their oppressive proxies.

Yet the world is changing, and the status quo is proving less and less acceptable as the drive for self-determination spreads. The imagination of peoples to see and create for themselves a better future is challenging the entrenched pure sovereignty establishment, and some actors are not just taking note but embracing the change, from Scottish independence to the Arab Spring. New methods of governance and self-determination, extending through the world like wildfire or a virus or a dark cloud lifting, depending on one’s point of view. And depending on the direction they take. States tend to give up power only as a last resort, and tend much more towards the central control of fascism than toward devolution. But if we act wisely, collectively, and strongly, this new Age of Autonomy could yield a golden age for everyone it touches.

The world is once again, or perhaps it is more apt to say still, at war. In Palestine and Gaza, in Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, Lebanon, Thailand and Congo, on top of all of the other conflicts already outlined previously. These conflicts are happening and there’s nothing we can do to prevent them. But we can make it different next time. A century past Versailles and Trianon, Europe is still governed along the lines and principles of those treaties. The treaty of Lausanne and the Sykes-Picot
Agreement did the same for the middle east, the lines remaining similar through this day despite the Arab Spring. Two decades since the signing of the supposedly-temporary Dayton Accords, Bosnia is still divided by them. The only thing stronger than a multi-lateral post-war treaty is the next war. When the dust finally settles in Crimea and Kurdistan and the Caucasus, in Syria and Afghanistan and Iraq, the treaties of the next decade will shape the following century. If post-conflict peacemakers can finally renounce the three-hundred-year-old poisons of the sovereignty of the oppressive ethnic majority state and build in provisions for the protection of autonomy into the new states, we can prevent the continuation of the last century of global perpetual war and finally secure the peace. We can change the future.

The theories are here from dozens of academics, and the blueprints are laid out by Bolivians and Kurds and Scots and Catalans, the instructions are clear for a new way forward. We can see that a successful movement is a nonviolent movement, as when a movement threatens the state’s monopoly on violence, it is rare that the state does not secure their monopoly by violently destroying the movement. It is not that violence against the state is not sometimes reasonable, it is merely that it is ineffective. And we can see that a successful movement must have external support, as Scotland had and South Tyrol has but Kurdistan and the Basque have not, external support by
outside states, by corporations, by celebrities and by private citizens, and the movements themselves must work to grow their popular internal support, to maintain their purity of purpose and their pacifism as they work with the state or build parallel institutions.

But even if all of these criteria are met, and even if we divest or boycott oppressive states, and even if we retweet and socially network the movement to millions of people, it won’t matter how many marches we organize in solidarity or how many bumper stickers we put on our cars or how many petitions we sign, the fight will still be movement by movement, activist by activist, and for each Scotland we’ll see ten Chechnyas and Tamil Nadus and Vojvodinas, unless there is a structural overhaul in Great Power diplomacy.

Sadly, there is very little that can be done to stop the extinguishing of cultures and multiculturalism in the dozens of cases studied in the preceding chapters, not until the next wars are over and the treaties rewritten. The defense of Kurdistan lies with the PKK, the YPJ, and the YPG. The defense of Vojvodina lies with the Sosas. As Richard Holbrooke told his Croat allies five days before the “neutral” peace talks he was then arranging in Dayton, “what you don’t gain on the battlefield will be hard to gain at the peace talks. Don’t waste these last days.”151 Because of the dominance of Holbrooke and his disciples in the halls of American diplomacy during the short but vital
period of US unipolar power, these words ring true throughout the majority of today’s conflict zones. Treaties are the only hope for peace, and war is all the more brutal for it. The best for which we can realistically hope is that preventative diplomacy in the next round of treaties can save the few remaining multicultural societies from destruction.

There are, at the publishing of this book, at least forty ongoing conflicts in nearly as many countries. Though legend and nationalism often convince us otherwise, there is no such thing as clear and absolute victory in modern conflict, only a series of partial wins and partial humiliations. Today’s conflicts end not in conquest but in treaty, and the treaties of yesterday built the wars of today. To prevent tomorrow’s wars, today’s treaty-makers must be responsible in a way their predecessors never were. Autonomy, not racial revenge or imperial interest but strong protections for ethnically, culturally, historically, religiously and linguistically respectful self-determination, as well as the loosening of the centralized monopoly of the state on power and violence, must be the centerpiece of any treaty ending conflict or building new borders, or we guarantee the next war.

Until Great Powers are forced by their own people to value the lives and happiness of people over the importance of power, regimes will continue to repress their non-majority peoples. Until, on a structural level, the
sovereignty of theoretical structures like states and regimes are reduced in importance and the lives of real people are increased in value, states will continue to be permitted to wipe out entire cultures.

Until principle, specifically the principles of human rights, of freedom to live and to love and to express oneself linguistically and artistically and politically as one sees fit without the threat of violence or death, the epitomal principles of self-determination and thereby of autonomy, is truly made to be more important than power, then those who are honest about their pursuit of pure power, those like Putin in Russia and Assad in Syria and Khomeini in Iran, the faceless mass of Chinese government and the warriors of IS, will continue to repress and exploit ad infinitum. Autonomy must be respected, and that respect must be incentivized by recognition of the voice of every region, of every people, not just to those in the central power of a state’s arbitrarily-drawn borders of sovereignty.

Autonomy saves lives, saves cultures, saves societies. So it might have been instead of the hundreds of thousands dead in Chechnya under Russia or in Syria under Assad. So it should have been instead of OSCE and NATO imperialism in Bosnia and Kosovo. So we can hope it will be for Crimea under Russia or whoever wrests control in Ukraine, or for Vojvodina under Serbia and Kurdistan under Turkey, if we’re not yet too late.
Sources

8 Ibid.
It turns out, Willy Brandt, Charles De Gaulle, Winston Churchill, and even George Washington had an opinion on the Kosovar question! At least, according to the Serbian Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija (images can be retrieved from http://studfor.net/viewtopic.php?t=2343)


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