Back to Kumanovo*

World war destroyed the first Yugoslavia. The second Yugoslavia expired more slowly, with the waning of the last great European empire, the USSR. As the Gorbachev years ran their course, western governments no longer needed to cultivate a special relationship with Belgrade. Yugoslavia was demoted in NATO’s security priorities to its pre-1949 status in April 1989, and the destruction of the Berlin Wall in November brought competition for western attention from the post-Communist states of Central Europe. The traditional conception of Yugoslavia as straddling the fault line between east and west reasserted itself: Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were all considered more suitable candidates for inclusion in a new European order than a troubled Balkan state. The ‘velvet revolutions’ in Eastern Europe paved the way to a relatively smooth incorporation of the Catholic periphery of the Soviet empire within the ambit of the European Community and NATO, adding a new sense of urgency to the efforts of Croatia and Slovenia to ‘disassociate’ themselves from the Yugoslav federation.

Following the aborted Fourteenth Congress, Slovenia and Croatia announced that they would hold multi-party elections for both parliament and the office of President of the republic in April 1990. These elections gave the victory to the Demos coalition in Slovenia (headed by the Christian Democrats), and returned Kučan as President with 59 per cent of the vote. In Croatia, a rather surprised Tudjman found himself in control of both chambers of the Sabor, his Croatian Democratic Union having gained two-thirds of all seats after a second round of voting. As soon as the results of these elections became known, the Army began disarming the Territorial Defence forces of both.
republics, without the authority or even knowledge of the Commander-in-Chief, the chair of the state Presidency, who was, inconveniently, a Slovene. The Slovenian leaders quickly brought the army’s operations to a halt, and in Croatia 50,000 police reservists were called up to reverse the Serb–Croat ethnic imbalance. Both republics also began buying arms illegally, shipped in mainly through Hungary. A military dimension had now been added to the conflicts within the federation.

Milošević was the key ally of the Army in resisting democratization. Serbia held the chair of the state Presidency after 15 May, in the person of Borisav Jović, and also retained (against all constitutional logic and fairness) the votes of Kosovo and the Vojvodina. When the voice of Montenegro was added, Serbia could not be outvoted on the eight-strong federal Presidency. Milošević appeared to bend to the winds of change: the League of Communists of Serbia was renamed the Socialist Party of Serbia in July, a gesture in the direction of the ‘reform’ communism sweeping through Eastern Europe. His real purpose, however, was to establish an unassailable power-base among the Serbs, since the chances of restoring a unitary federation were receding fast. Unable to ignore the sprouting of fractious opposition parties within Serbia, Milošević called a referendum on changes to the republic’s constitution (1–2 July), which he contrived to represent as a popular vote on the future of Kosovo. A massive 97 per cent of voters approved the changes, ratified on 28 September, which conferred great powers on the president of Serbia, including the role of ‘commander’ of the armed forces, at the expense of parliamentary institutions.

The corollary was the building-up of the armed forces over which Milošević had direct control, that is to say, paramilitaries. In October, he authorized the formation of the Serbian Volunteer Guard, commanded by Željko Ražnjatović, better known as ‘Arkan’ – murderer, political assassin, bankrobber, poseur and psychopath. Šešelj also re-established the Serbian Chetnik Movement in June, and was briefly imprisoned in October for fomenting rebellion among the Serbs in Croatia. The seeming contradiction is easily explained. Milošević had not yet given up on the Army as an instrument of policy, and he made great play with the Partizan myth to butter up the High Command. At the same time, he connived at barely concealed assistance to Serb paramilitary formations in Croatia. In the elections, the Croatian Serbs gave solid support to the reform communists led by Ivica Račan, and in order to outflank him Tudjman edged closer to the ultra-nationalist wing of the Croatian Democratic Union, driving the Serbs into the arms of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDP). Founded in February 1990, the SDP also