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Yugoslavia's Diversity

Mr. Peter Martin  
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Dear Peter:

Yugoslavia is so diverse it scarcely seems like one country, with its six republics and two autonomous provinces, each with distinctly different geography, history, culture, and even languages. I've made extensive agricultural tours that have taken me through, so far, the Republics of Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Hercegovina and the autonomous province of Vojvodina, talking with agricultural leaders and visiting farms. I've concluded that averages don't mean much in Yugoslavia. One almost has to look at each region individually.

Consider the contrast between Bosnia-Hercegovina and Vojvodina. The Vojvodina consists mainly of a rich agricultural plain lying between the Danube and Tisza rivers. Geographically, it really belongs to the Hungarian Plain and shares the same physical characteristics. Like Hungary it's ideal for grain production, producing almost 40 percent of Yugoslavia's corn and a third of its wheat. As one specialist remarked, "All Yugoslavia needs to solve its agricultural problems is just one more Vojvodina." Bosnia-Hercegovina, except for a strip of the Sava River valley, is almost entirely mountainous-- less than a third of it is arable land. Apart from grain produced in the Sava valley and some wine and tobacco in the southern part of the republic, most of the agricultural activity consists of grazing sheep and cattle on the natural pastures.

The contrast is not just geographical but is cultural as well, stemming from the differences in historical background of the two regions. Bosnia-Hercegovina was part of the Turkish Empire almost to the end of the Nineteenth Century, and 40 percent of its population remains Islamic even today. The Vojvodina was linked with Austria and Hungary

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almost 200 years earlier, and has a much more European flavor. Many people in Bosnia-Hercegovina attribute the fact that their average per capita income is 40 percent below the Yugoslavian average to the control of the Ottoman Empire for so long, which inhibited the development of transportation, education, communications and industry. This is a good point, but it can only partly explain why Vojvodina's per capita income was almost double that of Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1983. It's not as though the Vojvodina had no communications problems to overcome-- it has one of the most complex ethnic mixtures in Europe, with five official languages, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, Slovakian, and Ruthenian.

The Vojvodina's history also sets it apart from the rest of Yugoslavia, and especially from Bosnia-Hercegovina, in terms of the type of farm structure it has. Because so much of the land was in large estates before the war, 40 percent of the land in Vojvodina is now owned by the public sector ("social sector"), and is controlled by big agro-industrial "kombinats", and the other 60 percent of land is privately owned by individuals. In Bosnia-Hercegovina 95 percent of farmland is privately owned. Consequently there are only three important agro-industrial kombinats in Bosnia-Hercegovina, whereas Vojvodina has 20.

Since all of Yugoslavia's population is still heavily rural, the income derived from farming is important for many households. This is true both in Bosnia-Hercegovina and in the Vojvodina. But because the Vojvodina's agriculture is so much more productive, a family there can live entirely from farming, selling most of its products on the market. Even though average size of private farms there is small-- only 3.6 hectares-- there are many families who own and work the legal maximum of 10 hectares and are able to rent some additional land as well. Most of the farms are fully mechanized and several of the farm households I visited in the region seemed to have a standard of living as high or higher than the urban workers.

Even though small even by European standards, these farms represent modern commercial enterprises rather than peasant subsistence farms. An example that's perhaps not typical, but isn't all that unusual, is the farm of Rakic Branislava, which I visited in the village of Backa Gradiste about 40 miles north of Novi Sad. He regularly gets yields of 8,000 liters of milk per year from his small herd of American Holsteins and by producing 7 to 8 tons of wheat per hectare and 10 tons of corn per hectare on the 25 hectares of land that he owns and rents, he has a complete fodder basis for all his livestock. As small farms go, his was quite progressive, with its own silo, feed mill, two tractors, a combine, equipment for handling liquid manure, and enough space to store all his hay under cover.

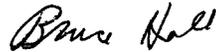
Bosnian mountain farms are another story altogether. Here too average farm size is about 3 hectares, but in the mountain regions even 10 hectares would likely not be enough to provide a decent income for a family. In the village of Trnovi, which lies in the shadow of Mount Treskavice south of Sarajevo, none of the village's 80 families are full-time farmers, even though the farms provide most of their meat and vegetables throughout the year. The majority of them earn their cash income in Sarajevo or at a lumber mill nearby. Government industrialization policy has encouraged development of such decentralized industries, in order to reduce migration to the cities, but the effect on agriculture hasn't been too positive. Farmers have retained their landholdings for subsistence purposes but haven't the time or the interest in expanding or improving their land to produce a marketable surplus. For example, there's only one tractor in this village. One Muslim farmer I talked to there, with three daughters and one son, is obviously hanging on to his land mainly so his son can inherit it. He keeps two horses for draft power, but he's not interested in developing the production on his 3 hectares of land beyond what he's able to handle on 20 days of vacation from the lumber mill. His great-uncle, the 95-year-old patriarch of the village, says he grew up with pretty much the same farming practices that are used there today.

The poor conditions for farming in such regions have meant that Bosnia-Herzegovina has had to develop its industry rather than using agriculture as a basis for development. Part of the industrialization policy has been to bring industry to the places where the labor force is, like Trnovi, rather than to centralize it in the big cities. A key motivation of this policy has been not only to reduce the costs of resettling emigrants, but also to maintain a ready supply of manpower for defense purposes in the mountain areas.

Defense is one of the few things that visibly unites Yugoslavia, along with the ghost of Tito, whose picture still hangs on every office and shop wall. Almost all other activities are financed and carried out by the governments of each individual republic. An important mechanism however for insuring cooperation between the less-developed regions like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo, and the more-developed republics like Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Vojvodina is the system of contributions by the richer republics, that are used to stimulate economic development in the poorer ones. There seems to be a special relationship between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia. I was told of several instances where Slovenian funds had

been used to develop Bosnian agro-industries. But with Yugoslavia as diverse and decentralized as it is (each republic, for example, runs its own post office and railway system), there's always the danger that the more-developed republics will become dissatisfied with the need to siphon off resources to these poorer areas. So far, among the people I've talked to, the common enthusiasm for Yugoslavia as a political and economic entity seems strong enough to overcome any move towards national fragmentation. But if the economic gap between regions like Vojvodina and Bosnia-Herzegovina continues to widen, the pull towards separate republic identities could well become stronger.

Sincerely,



Bruce Hall

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