The Wehrmacht in Yugoslavia: Lessons of the Past?

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For the last year the United States has teetered on the verge of intervention in the former Yugoslavia. In February 1993 President Clinton launched a more aggressive US policy, and by late spring intervention seemed imminent. If that tendency has now receded somewhat, it still remains near the surface. Whether or not US intervention actually occurs, the prospect has provided a field day for op-ed writers, who have had a year to consider, reconsider, and re-reconsider both the perils of intervention and the human cost of nonintervention. Prominently featured in this long period of analysis has been the experience of the German Wehrmacht in Yugoslavia during the Second World War.

Some commentators have stated that Germany needed only six divisions to hold Yugoslavia,[1] while others have cited 20 or 30 divisions and terrible difficulties. These numbers—six divisions, 20 divisions, 30 divisions—get passed along from writer to writer and become undisputed wisdom, all without the benefit of hard data. Because our armed forces—particularly our ground forces—could end up operating in this troubled land, the insights of history are not an academic concern. There may be some value then, on the eve of a possible intervention, in looking more closely at the German experience. What was their experience? How difficult was the fighting? How many troops were involved?

Two Separate Campaigns

The first thing that becomes apparent in looking at the German war effort is that there were two campaigns—the initial defeat of Yugoslavia and the later guerrilla war. These were as different as two campaigns could be. The first campaign involved the initial subjugation of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1941. It provides an interesting parallel for today's situation if one views the Serbian

nation as the center of gravity for the current troubles and if, consequently, one believes that a strike at the Serbian government would be decisive. Here the German example is encouraging. The story, briefly, is as follows:

In early 1941 Yugoslavia began drifting into the Axis camp. A coup overthrew the pro-Axis government in March 1941, however, and Yugoslav policy became anti-Axis. Hitler was furious and ordered revenge. On 6 April, the Germans struck with 23 divisions, many diverted from the upcoming attack on the Soviet Union. The Yugoslav army, 1,000,000 men and 28 divisions strong on paper, never had a chance to mobilize. Furthermore, the ethnic tensions in the Yugoslav army sharply reduced its effectiveness. Many Croat units, for instance, mutinied or deserted. In any case, the superiority of the Wehrmacht in weaponry, tactics, and mobility gave it a decisive advantage. To further demoralize and paralyze the Yugoslav government, the Germans terror-bombed Belgrade at the beginning of the war, killing an estimated 17,000. When the serious fighting was finished, Italy moved in, as it had against France ten months earlier. On 17 April, 11 days after the war began, an armistice was signed. Total German losses were 151 killed, 392 wounded, and 15 missing—558 casualties in all. The state of Yugoslavia was disestablished, and its territory was divided among Germany, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, and a Croatian puppet state (see map).

The Guerrilla War—First Phase

The second campaign, however, is the one that most people think of in connection with Yugoslavia. This was the guerrilla campaign, which began when the first campaign ended and continued to the end of the war. It provides a particularly powerful image to Americans today because of the similarities it bears to North Vietnam's war against us: a war fought against a foreign power with substantial but ineffective local allies; the presence of a charismatic guerrilla leader; and substantial outside help for the guerrillas.

The first phase of the guerrilla war ran from the beginning of the German occupation to the surrender of Italy (September 1943). The Yugoslavs were initially so stunned by their defeat that they acquiesced to the occupation. Resistance, while evident from the beginning of the occupation, built up slowly. Consequently the occupying powers, pressed by military requirements else-

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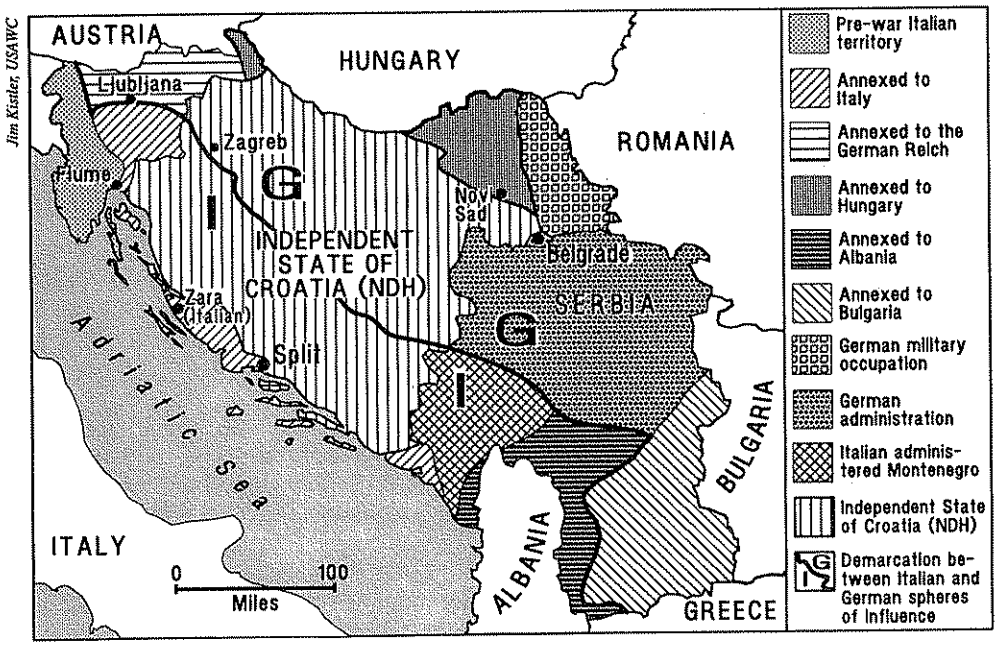

The Partitioning of Yugoslavia, 1941

where, sent only relatively weak occupation forces initially (22 understrength divisions,[2] as Table 1 shows[3]). The German forces included only one really good division, the 7th SS, which was created later. The bulk of the German force was four 700-series divisions, which were weak, designed for limited garrison duties, and rushed into theater only three months after being established. The reserve "division" was actually a collection of training schools.

Table 1 also shows that it was not just a German effort but involved Germany's allies as well—the Italians mainly, but also the Bulgarians and local allies, predominantly Croats. The Italians were, in fact, the principal occupying power. Their army, however, had its attention focused on the African desert, not Yugoslavia. Therefore, Italian forces in Yugoslavia did not receive the highest quality units or adequate supplies.

Gradually the brutality of the occupation increased resistance. Furthermore, conditions were excellent for guerrilla war. The terrain along the coast and in the western interior is rugged, making movement difficult, and there was a long tradition of irregular warfare in the mountains. The Montenegrins, for instance, had held out at their Black Mountain for 300 years against the Turks. During 1941 the resistance coalesced around two forces: the royalist "Chetniks" led by Colonel Draja Mihailovitch and the communist group under Josip Broz ("Tito"). These two groups were as interested in fighting each other as in fighting the Axis. The Chetniks particularly were willing to form temporary alliances with the Germans and Italians in order to suppress the communists.

The guerrilla war took on a classic form. The guerrillas[4] inflicted damage in hit-and-run operations and controlled the countryside. On the other hand, they could not stand up to regular forces. Axis regular units inflicted heavy casualties on the guerrillas whenever they met in pitched battles. These occurred during several major operations, each involving tens of thousands of men and large units on both sides. In the "Fifth German Offensive" of May 1943, for instance, Tito's forces were almost trapped and suffered 10,000 dead or missing.[5] However, the ruggedness of the terrain, the lack of sufficient Axis

German Divisions

704, 714, 717, 718

These divisions (like all 15th-wave divisions in the 700 series) were designed for occupation duty. The personnel were overage, and their training was incomplete before deployment. Further, they had only two regiments (vs. the usual three), few heavy weapons, and little transport.

7 SS *Prinz Eugen*

An excellent SS division, formed of ethnic Germans (*volksdeutsche*) from Yugoslavia and Romania. Designed for mountain operations. Operational in October 1942.

187 Reserve

A training formation, not a reserve unit, with very limited combat capability. Shifted to Yugoslavia in December 1942.

Italian Divisions

VI Corps: 18, 32, 14
XIV Corps: 19, 23, 154, 1st Alpine
XI Corps: 4(cadre), 2(cadre), 57
XVIII Corps: 15, 158, 17th Coastal Brigade
V Corps: 153, 155, 4th Coastal Brigade

Italian infantry divisions had two regiments, plus a "Legion" (battalion) of fascist black shirts (with strong ideological training but little military training). Total of about 12,600 personnel. Italian divisions had only 36 light artillery pieces, no tanks, and few vehicles. Coastal brigades were light infantry. Only the alpine division was designed for mobile operations in poor terrain.

Bulgarian Divisions

I Corps: 22, 24, 25
V Corps: 14, 27

Immobile, poorly trained. Best Bulgarian forces were kept opposite Turkey.

Croat Forces

8 Brigades

Little military training. Very brutal to Serbian minority.

Serbian Collaborationist Forces

10 Battalions

Mostly police-type units.

Table 1: Axis Forces in Yugoslavia, 1943

forces, and the absence of an effective central command prevented a knockout blow by the Axis.

During these operations the Axis forces—particularly the Bulgarians and Italians—committed many atrocities. Initially these intimidated the population, but eventually they produced extreme hatred and spurred guerrilla recruiting.[6] By the end of this period the guerrillas numbered about 70,000 to 100,000.

As resistance increased, the requirement for occupation troops also increased. The Italians could send no new units, however. Instead they withdrew from much of the interior to concentrate their overstretched forces in the most critical areas. The Germans sent in two additional divisions permanently (7th SS and 187th Reserve) plus others for specific operations, and they organized their forces as an Army Group. German forces operated widely in Yugoslavia since their allies were unable to control their own territory.

The Guerrilla War—Second Phase

The surrender of the Italians in September 1943 radically changed the war in Yugoslavia. The Germans had to compensate for the 14 Italian divisions now gone.[7] Furthermore, the partisans captured immense amounts of materiel from the Italians and were thus much better armed. As a result the Germans moved in more forces of their own. The Germans ended up committing 12 divisions, a significant force, but still only five percent of the 270 divisions available. Moreover, the quality of the German units was not significantly better than before. Only two divisions (1st Mountain and 7th SS) could be considered excellent. Two others were good (118th and 181st). The others all had drawbacks that would have rendered them unfit for front-line service on, for instance, the Eastern Front. Table 2 describes the German divisions individually.

The Bulgarians continued with five divisions; the Croats, using conscription, expanded their forces to about 14 brigades; and Serbian collaborationist forces remained at ten battalions. Thus by the end of 1943, German forces in Yugoslavia numbered about 700,000, and total Axis forces numbered about 900,000. Facing them were an estimated 90,000 of Tito's guerrillas (rising to perhaps 200,000 in 1944). By this time the Chetniks, discredited by inaction and collaboration with the Axis, and diminished by battlefield reverses, were no longer a major player.

The Germans continued aggressive actions against the guerrillas, including more major operations in which the guerrillas were badly beaten. In one operation (Offensive VI or *Rosselsprung*) Tito was nearly captured and his headquarters was driven off the mainland for the remainder of the war. This outcome produced an interesting naval sidelight in the Adriatic: the Germans' weakness at sea inhibited them from pursuing the guerrillas onto all the many off-shore islands, which thus remained safe-havens through the end of the war.

Army Divisions

1 Mountain: The premier German division in Yugoslavia. Part of German prewar army, made up of Bavarians from mountain regions. Very mobile in rough terrain. It provided the mobile force in all the anti-partisan operations.

98: An excellent division but worn out in Russia. Sent to Yugoslavia for rebuilding.

118 Light or *Jäger*: A division of Austrians, originally the 718th Division, redesigned and upgraded for anti-partisan warfare in April 1943 as the Germans became more serious about the partisan war. Served virtually entire war in Yugoslavia. Good quality.

181: A solid division. Raised in 1940.

264: A second-class unit. Served in Yugoslavia for most of war.*

369: Consisted mainly of Croatians with German cadres. A successor in name but not in quality to the 369th Croatian Infantry Regiment. Unreliable. (The original regiment was the "Croatian Army Legion" consisting of Croatian volunteers in the German army. It was attached to the 100th *Jäger* Division and was destroyed at Stalingrad.)

373: Another division of Croatians with German cadre. Poor performance.

392: Yet another division of Croatians with German cadre, but this one performed well.**

1 Cossack: Composed of Russian Cossacks. Apparently performed well. Fought to the end. Members captured by the Soviets and executed after the war.

SS Divisions

7 *Prinz Eugen*: A mountain division made up of ethnic Germans from the Balkans. Established in 1942 specifically for partisan warfare. Fought well but committed many atrocities.

13 *Handschar*: Composed of Croatian and Bosnian Moslems (!). Unreliable and committed many atrocities. Transformed into a battle group of ethnic Germans later in the war and fought to the end.

21 *Skanderbeg*: Composed of Albanians. Unreliable. Disbanded and folded into 7th SS.

* The higher the division number in the German army, generally, the lower the quality. High numbered divisions were either raised late in the war when resources were scarce or were designed for limited purposes.

** One insight from this table is that observers of the current civil war should be cautious when talking about the "good" Croats and Bosnians and the "bad" Serbians as if these were eternal verities. This may be today's perspective, but World War II looks very different. (Note the number of collaborationist Croat and Bosnian units.) These Balkan conflicts have been going on for centuries. Rather than characterizing the good guys and bad guys, observers should focus on good and bad behavior.

Table 2: German Divisions in Yugoslavia, August 1944

Yet it was an uphill struggle for the Germans. The population could see which way the wind was blowing, and Axis brutality had thoroughly alienated them. The guerrillas were much better armed and organized than before. Allied forces just across the Adriatic in Italy provided massive logistical

support and a secure "rear area" (thousands of Yugoslav casualties, for instance, were evacuated to hospitals in Italy). German Field Marshal von Weichs commented in late 1944 that he considered the partisans the equivalent of regular forces. Thus, by 1944 the Germans were on the defensive. Still, although they had lost control of the countryside, they never lost linkage with their forces in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, they could move into, though not hold, any territory they desired. Eventually the Balkan theater became part of the Eastern Front and was subsumed into that larger struggle.

Casualties are, of course, of great interest, but it's hard to get good data on them. A rough estimate, based on German records, is that Germany suffered 10,000 deaths in Yugoslavia during the guerrilla war.[8] While these casualties were significant, they represented less than one percent of total German dead during the war. The Italians, the major occupying power for most of the period, lost 11,000 killed or missing in Yugoslavia through September 1943.[9] Without question, however, the greatest suffering was borne by the Yugoslav people. According to a postwar study, the Yugoslavs suffered 1.7 million dead, 11 percent of their pre-war population, and another 425,000 disabled.[10]

Interpreting History

George Santayana's dictum about remembering history is so driven into our consciousness that observers instinctively seek out relevant history to understand its lessons. Indeed, given the shortage of reliable crystal balls, history is one of the few guides to the future that observers have. So it is in this case. There are certainly some striking parallels between 1941-1945 and a possible US intervention in 1993:

- Intervention by outsiders from many nations with only a weak unifying command
- Elements of civil war, with some groups siding with the outsiders
- Serbian-led resistance to outsiders
- Weakness of Yugoslav forces in conventional battle
- Combined irregular and conventional fighting
- Guerrilla weakness in air and naval forces

As a result one might be inclined to apply lessons learned from World War II to a hypothetical future intervention. Indeed, a postwar US study published in 1954 did just that in considerable detail.

> A review of the mistakes that these [Axis] commanders made would undoubtedly cause them to urge any future occupier to begin his administration with a clear-cut statement of policy, including a promise of eventual withdrawal of occupation troops and self-determination for the people; a unified military command and distinct delineation of responsibility in the political and military fields; the assignment of trained, well-equipped combat troops in adequate numbers to the area; the taking of prompt and effective though not excessively harsh measures to quell

disorders; and an extensive propaganda campaign to explain the purpose of the operation and the benefits to accrue to the population with the maintenance of law and order. Finally, they would most certainly recommend the troops be supplied from outside the country and restrained from excesses. With perseverance, the occupation forces might then be able to avoid the Balkan chaos of 1941-1944.[11]

But one must be extremely cautious. Misapplying the "lessons of history" is as common as using them appropriately—perhaps more so. Intervention in Vietnam, once interpreted in the context of Munich and appeasement, turned out to be no such thing. Since 1975 every use of force has been branded "another potential Vietnam," so far inappropriately. In the case of Yugoslavia, there are two strong reasons for caution in applying the German experience from World War II.

First, the results in World War II were very mixed, contrary to the writings of many current observers seeking support for one policy or another.

- The initial German success was quick and easy. In fact, the initial victory looked like a 1941 version of Desert Storm: It was a triumph of quality over quantity; it involved the moral disintegration of the opponent before his physical destruction; and it entailed very low casualties on the part of the attacker. This precedent is thus encouraging if one views Serbia as the focus of today's problem. A quick, Desert Storm-like strike by air and land might crush Serbia's military capability. But Germany's military success in 1941 did not avert a long guerrilla war. The victory produced short-term political gains—the Germans redrew the political map of Yugoslavia to their liking—but, as in Desert Storm, the victory did not translate into long-term political success.
- Occupying forces were large but not first-rate. The low quality of these troops gives support to the "intervention is easy" camp, while the size of the force supports the "another Vietnam" camp. What this might mean for high-quality but relatively small NATO forces is unclear.[12]
- Finally, casualties were heavy but not in the context of a world war. The 20,000+ dead the Axis suffered in the guerrilla war are far more than any NATO force would tolerate. But one must ask whether this level of casualties reflects the character of the world war, with its total commitment and brutality, or whether it is inherent in the character of any intervention in this region.

The second reason for caution is that there are important differences between 1941-1945 and 1993.[13] Some of the differences would seem to support those who advocate a military intervention:

- Axis treatment of the population was abysmal and encouraged resistance. The occupiers' hard-pressed economies, their contempt for the local people, and their repressive methods all ensured a brutal occupation. Intervention in 1993, to the contrary, would be mostly humanitarian (depending on the mission), and, even if it involved "peacemaking" and combat operations, it would be far more tolerable to the population. NATO forces have strict rules of

engagement, a vigilant press, and functioning, independent legal systems, all of which would mitigate the harshness of an occupation.

• The intervention forces likely to be employed in 1993 are better than the second-line German and other Axis forces employed during the guerrilla war of 1941-1945. As we have seen, the Axis forces in this theater were generally of low quality. The theater was, after all, a backwater in the world war. Conversely, the intervention forces likely to be used by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and others are generally their highest quality forces. These forces are highly trained, fully equipped, and abundantly supplied.

• The tough Yugoslav guerrilla fighters of World War II were the product of a ruthless survival-of-the-fittest process. David Hackworth's characterization of them as the toughest fighters he has ever met reflects the fact that he met the survivors of four years of fighting the Wehrmacht. Today's fighters have survived no such test, and most come from a life closer to that of a middle-class suburbanite than the harsher existence of a peasant farmer.[14]

• Military thinkers are currently debating whether a revolution in warfare is underway, wherein the information component of warfare is becoming paramount. Whether this is true or not, there is no question that modern surveillance and targeting capabilities would provide an important advantage to NATO that the Axis lacked in 1941-1945.

Other differences argue against military intervention:

• The Axis achieved surprise in their initial invasion. Any move in 1993 would be known far in advance. Press speculation, national decision-making processes, and international consultations would ensure a highly publicized operation. Troop movements would be known as soon as they were made. Thus, strategic and operational surprise would be impossible, although some tactical surprise might still be achievable.

• Current indigenous forces in the former Yugoslavia are well trained and organized for guerrilla operations. In 1941 the Yugoslav army was oriented on conventional operations. Its utter failure in 1941 and the success of the later guerrilla campaign resulted in a postwar Yugoslav army oriented on irregular warfare. The various factions in Yugoslavia today benefit from that legacy.

• NATO's political ability to endure casualties is very limited. Whereas the Axis campaign in Yugoslavia was part of a struggle for survival, NATO's intervention would be part of a second-tier foreign policy action—important, but not vital to national life. NATO's inability to tolerate casualties would probably be the cornerstone of any Serbian strategy—i.e. hold on, keep forces intact, inflict a trickle of casualties until NATO tires, then negotiate a face-saving peace plan for NATO to withdraw.

• NATO's political goal—peace—would be more difficult to achieve than the Axis goal of acquiescence. Ending a civil war requires that all parties agree, stop fighting, and not start again later.

The "lessons of history" should not be applied lightly. A valid and useful application of history, here as elsewhere, must begin with a detailed examination of the comparative circumstances. It must then look at the different actors and personalities involved. Only then can analysis produce insights from the past that can guide us in the present. The analysis here is only a beginning.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Norman Stone, "The Eagle's Curse," *The Sunday Times*, 9 August 1992, p. 9.

2. One common confusion is about forces in Yugoslavia vs. forces in the Balkans. Forces in Yugoslavia are described here. Both Germany and Italy had large forces elsewhere in the Balkans, mainly in Albania and Greece. Italy, for instance, had 17 more divisions in Greece and Albania.

3. Data for this table and the following table are from the following sources: *German Antiguerilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1945)*, Department of the Army, 1954; Samuel W. Mitcham, *Hitler's Legions* (Briar Cliff, N.Y.: Stein and Day, 1985); W. Victor Madej, *Italian Army Order of Battle: 1940-1944* (Allentown, Pa.: Valor Publishing, 1990); W. Victor Madej, *German Army Order of Battle: The Replacement Army 1939-1945* (Allentown, Pa.: Valor Publishing, 1984); Roger James Bender and Hugh Taylor, *Uniforms, Organization and History of the Waffen SS* (San Jose, Calif.: R. James Bender Publishing, 1972), vols. 3, 4, and 5.

4. In this article I use the term "guerrilla," the most common American term for this kind of fighter, and apply it to both Chetniks and communists. The communists used the term "partisan" instead.

5. "Fifth German Offensive" is the partisan term; the German code name was "Schwarz."

6. These atrocities were repaid in kind after the war by brutal treatment of Axis POWs and *volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) in Yugoslavia. See Martin Sage, *The Other Price of Hitler's War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 58-59; and Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, "A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing," *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Summer 1993), 110-21.

7. When the Italian government surrendered, it was unable to warn its forces in time, and the Allies were slow to move. Consequently, the Germans were able to disarm and imprison most of the Italian forces. A few resisted. After the surrender in Yugoslavia, the Italians had 12,000 casualties in battles with guerrillas and Germans. In Greece, the Germans executed 4000 men from one Italian division (the 33d, "Acqui") that resisted.

8. German records show 20,276 German dead for Army Group Southwest from 22 June 1941 to 31 March 1945, according to *German and Soviet Replacement Systems in World War II* (Dunn Loring, Va.: Historical Evaluation and Research Organization, 1975). Some large part of these, however, came in the last few months during the fighting withdrawal north and after this theater became part of the Eastern Front. Furthermore, Army Group Southwest included Greece and Albania as well as Yugoslavia. The figure of 10,000 German dead was arrived at as follows: Since three-fourths of the German occupation troops in Army Group South were in Yugoslavia, assume that three-fourths of the casualties were there also. A further rough estimate is that one-third of the casualties came from the period when the theater had become part of the Eastern Front after September 1944, when much of the fighting was against the Soviets. The resulting calculation is, therefore, 3/4 x 2/3 x 20,276 = 10,036. These figures should not be construed as anything other than historical data. They in no way imply that large-scale intervention in the present-day conflict by US and allied forces, should it occur, would result in similar casualty rates.

9. Madej, *Italian Army Order of Battle: 1940-1944*, 1990), p. 25.

10. The study was conducted by the Inter-Allied Reparations Conference of 1948. Most casualties were caused by the civil war, not by the occupation. See Ilija Jukic, *The Fall of Yugoslavia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1974), p. 7.

11. US Department of the Army, *German Antiguerilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1945)* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1954), p. 78.

12. For simplicity here, "NATO" is assumed to be the command structure for any current intervention. However, for this analysis, any other command structure would do.

13. And no one who has ever read *Thinking in Time* can ever make a casual historical analogy again. See Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986). In this book Neustadt and May, using a variety of case studies, show how compelling historical analogies are but how misleading they can be when applied superficially. They prescribe an analytical format for placing events into context, for understanding the various actors, and for identifying the differences in situations as well as their similarities.

14. Yugoslavia's 1989 income per capita was $5,464, in the range of states like Greece ($5,605), Hungary ($6,108), and Portugal ($6,900), and well above states like Turkey ($1,350) and Albania ($1,200).