

Daniele Conversi. *German-Bashing and the Breakup of Yugoslavia* (= *The Donald W. Treadgold Papers 16*). Seattle: The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, The University of Washington. 1998. 88 pp., no price given.

This monograph contains only fifty-one pages of text, backed by twenty-three pages of footnotes, but it does a thorough job of putting to rest one of the most persistent—and silliest—myths to emerge from the wars of the Yugoslav succession, namely the “Myth of Early Recognition.” Proponents of this view hold that Germany under the leadership of Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher acted hastily and selfishly in December 1991 when it recognized the independence of Croatia and Slovenia and prompted the EC to do the same. Those that believe this argument also feel that the former Yugoslavia could have somehow been held together had Bonn, and then Brussels, not acted as they did.

What this “recognition debate” is really about is whether Yugoslavia could have been restored at the end of 1991. Those who believe that the Yugoslav Humpty Dumpty could have been put back together again seem to ignore the impact on all concerned of six months of fighting that included a successful war of independence by Slovenia, and a bloody conflict in Croatia that captured headlines around the world with the shelling of Dubrovnik and the siege and destruction of Vukovar. In reality, recognition was not a matter of haste, but of acknowledging a new situation in Southeastern Europe. It is to the great credit of Genscher and his government that they appreciated this and acted in response to the transformations that had already taken place. Conversi shows that Germany was not the only European country to support recognition in 1991, but stresses that German policy was decisive because Bonn was a major European power, had the political will to act, and could not afford to overlook Balkan realities on its very doorstep. He also notes that this was “Germany’s first bold foreign policy initiative since the end of World War II ... [and] occurred in the wake of ... German reunification” (7).

It was, as Conversi points out in his title, a fear of renewed and assertive German power that led to the “German-bashing” in Germany, France, and elsewhere, which he analyzes at length. He suggests that “Britain, France, and other countries chose to follow the basic instinct of primordial alliances and historical memories, rather than seize the

momentum and acknowledge the ongoing transformation in Eastern Europe” (21). Conversi traces several variations on this theme, including the belief in a “Fourth Reich conspiracy” (28) and a “Papist conspiracy” (31)—both of which, by the way, were also staple fare in the Serbian media controlled by Serbian President Slobodan Milošević.

With the beginning of the Bosnian conflict in 1992 and the inauguration of the Clinton administration the following year, the picture became more complex. Germany’s role became less paramount, and that of the United States more so.

Conversi traces the development of U.S. “weakness, indecision, and incapacity to act” (42). This was buttressed by a revival of the myth that recognition of Slovenian and Croatian realities had somehow made things worse and prevented the “saving” of Yugoslavia, as though that corpse could be resurrected.

On the contrary, Conversi argues, Washington’s resorting to the “early recognition” myth only served to blur distinctions between victim and aggressor—and encourage Serbian forces in the belief that aggression would not be stopped or punished, especially if Serbian forces acted in the name of “Yugoslavia” (44–46, 57).

Why did this come about? Conversi believes that most Western governments not only had misguided and prejudiced views about Germany but also lacked serious and competent analysis of the situation in the region and the forces behind the ongoing changes. He suggests that there is a strong pro-Serbian tradition in British and French public life, backed by an active Serbian diaspora.

He adds that a similar situation obtained in the United States, where few people allegedly knew anything about Yugoslavia. One might argue, however, that U.S. behavior in 1991 was primarily conditioned not by ignorance of Yugoslav realities but by a desire to keep the Soviet Union from imploding. And one might also note that numerous U.S.-Yugoslav academic exchange programs had been active for decades. These meant that there was ample expertise at hand for the asking, but the voices that counted—particularly in 1991 and 1992—were those of Americans trained in Belgrade and used to rubbing shoulders with the Belgrade elite. In the opinion of this reviewer, it was there that the problem lay. Conversi stresses that Germany had closer geographical and social proximity to the Balkans than did the other three Western powers,

and the presence of hundreds of thousands of Albanian, Croatian, Bosnian Muslim, and Slovenian (as well as Serbian) *Gastarbeiter* in Germany “made it more difficult than elsewhere to hide the truth” (48). And part of the truth, Conversi points out, was that the fears of Yugoslavia’s non-Serbs of an “impending menace ... were far from imaginary” (57).

Conversi concludes his short, but in many ways exhaustive, survey by noting the obsession of some Western policy makers with “Balkanization,” or the unwelcome dissolution of failed states into new ones (58). He argues, however, that it was not this process that posed the greatest threat to stability, but rather misguided and ill-conceived projects aimed at reviving that which was already dead.

From the perspective of November 2003, it is interesting to revisit the realities of 1991–93 through the prism of a monograph written in 1998. One thing has changed since Conversi wrote his study—namely, the international role and image of Germany.

Far from turning into a superpower seeking to control the continent on its own, it has shown itself to be unable to modernize its economy or lift the former East to the level of the former West, despite a torrent of subsidies. Moreover, in a risky effort to win reelection in 2002 and keep the backing of a public fed a steady diet of anti-Americanism by the media, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has perhaps permanently damaged his country’s vital relations with the United States. And if Germany poses a threat to much of the rest of Europe in 2004 and beyond, it is likely to be only as a junior partner of France in an effort to maintain the self-assigned “leading role” of those two countries in an expanded EU. The second point worth noting is something that remains as true today as it was in 1991 or 1998: the obsessive desire in some Western capitals to revive Humpty Dumpty and prevent the continuation of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. We have seen this in the determination of the EU in recent years to prevent the breakup of Serbia and Montenegro, and in the general hesitancy of the Western powers to face up to reality—again—and recognize the independence of Kosova.

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