

Viktor Meier. *Yugoslavia: A History of Its Demise* Trans. Sabrina P. Ramet. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. x + 279 pp., \$85.00 (cloth); \$25.00 (paper). ISBN: 0415185955 (cloth), 0415185963 (paper).

Scores of books and hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of articles have been written on the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed in the 1990s. Many cover the Slovenes and Slovenia only briefly or, if at length, assign the Slovenes major blame for the country's collapse. Slovenia is faulted for acting provocatively and irresponsibly with respect to Belgrade (seat of both the Yugoslav federal and Serbian republic governments), and it is accused of refusing to continue negotiating toward a solution to Yugoslavia's problems. Many of the best known works in English on the former Yugoslavia often hold to this view. Viktor Meier's book, however, treats the Slovene aspects of the story extensively. This is logical, given that his coverage is limited to only the period from Tito's death in 1980 through the recognition of independence for Slovenia and Croatia in January, 1992, that is, several months before war broke out in Bosnia. Furthermore, Meier is especially sympathetic to Slovenia's situation and to that of its leaders. He would characterize the Slovenes as having acted the most rationally and responsibly of all the Yugoslav groups in a historically chaotic time.

In an opening chapter of the book, Meier cites a Bosnian political scientist that observed that Yugoslavia fell apart not so much because it was multinational but because it was undemocratic. Although these are not his words, they represent Meier's assessment of the situation. He views the collapse of Yugoslavia as the result of a political struggle between those that favored "liberal" economic and political reforms and those that balked at change. The opponents of reform mobilized those forces that had assured Tito's control of the country: the League of Communists (LCY), the army (JNA), and the police. As economic ills became more serious in the 1980s, these "establishment" elements became more entrenched against reform, preferring to borrow money, to pass laws against traveling abroad with hard (foreign) currency, and to fill Yugoslavia's jails with political prisoners—among them, Franjo Tudjman, Alija Izetbegović, and the Albanian leader Azem Vlassi. All of this was occurring at a time when communism in eastern Europe was in collapse. The last communist regime (the

Romanian) fell with the bloody execution of the Ceaușescu in December 1989, the month before the last LCY (14th) congress convened in Belgrade. Ironically, the Yugoslav party that had challenged Stalin in the early fifties and had been regarded as “liberal” by the West, was the last to defend the centralized party state and state capitalism.

For Meier, Serbia and Slobodan Milošević, who became head of the Serbian communists in 1986, are the villains of the story. They devised a plan to extend Serbian hegemony over Yugoslavia; failing that, they would settle for a greater Serbia, a goal first articulated in the mid-19th century. The Constitution of 1974, which had given the six Yugoslav republics and its two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) considerable autonomy within the country’s federal system, was the bane of a true Serb’s existence. It had stripped Serbia of its rightful lands, and relegated Serbs to territories outside the homeland. Tito and the Slovene, Edvard Kardelj, the chief author of Yugoslavia’s constitutions, were blamed for Serbia’s woes. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts even wrote a “Memorandum” to that effect in 1986. It was agreed: the constitution had to be changed and Serb ends needed to be advanced. And it was begun, mostly illegally, undemocratically, and to the advantage of Serbian and Milošević’s power. By July 1990, Vojvodina and Kosovo had been stripped of their autonomy, and even Montenegro, a separate republic, had been pressed into the Serbian camp. In February 1989, a new Serbian constitution confirmed Serbian control over the autonomous provinces.

In the late 1980s, Slovenia emerged as the leading opponent of Serbian expansionism. It spoke on behalf of oppressed Albanians in Kosovo and defended federalism as outlined in the 1974 constitution. Slovenes soon also backed liberal economic reform and eventually political change as well. The “liberal” wing took control of the Slovene communist party in 1986 and ultimately came around to the idea of a multiparty system and free elections. By 1987, Slovenes also began calling for closer union with western Europe—German and Italian imperialisms were no longer a threat—for they hoped to loosen Slovenia’s ties with authoritarian Balkan ways. Party leaders gradually took up their cause.

Briefly, after the Croat Ante Marković became Prime Minister of Yugoslavia in March 1989, there was hope that meaningful economic

reform might be implemented. The hope, however, was short-lived. Meier depicts Marković as a “superficial optimist,” that failed to realize that every victory for Serbian power was a loss for Yugoslavia’s, the state that he headed. Marković stood smilingly by at the ceremony that feted the adoption of the new Serbian constitution (which negated the Yugoslav one); he allowed a Serbian economic boycott of Slovene goods in 1989; he failed to challenge Milošević after the latter raided the federal bank for his own political ends in late 1990; and, finally, Marković ordered the Serb-dominated JNA to stop the Slovenes militarily in June 1991. For Meier, Marković was an unwitting accomplice in the demise of Yugoslavia.

So, too, was the army, which, under the guise of standing behind a unified Yugoslav state, became the tool of Serbian expansionism. Incidentally, Meier’s view on the JNA’s Ten Day War in Slovenia in late June 1991 is that it was not a “phony war,” as some analysts claim. Of its 22,000 troops in Slovenia, 2,000 retreated, 8,000 were captured, while 12,000 remained at large until their departure was arranged (based an agreement initiated by Janez Drnovšek, then head of the Yugoslav presidency, with the Serb Borisav Jović). According to Meier, the JNA could not “Serbify” itself in spring 1991; it was, in fact, “vanquished and beaten” in Slovenia.

The Western powers also bear great responsibility for the tragedy of Yugoslavia, according to Meier. They were generally poorly informed about the area; their diplomats traveled little outside the capital and therefore usually reflected the Belgrade point of view. In the West, too, there was a lingering “romantic” attitude toward Yugoslavia, the darling state of the Cold War era. When things began to heat up there in the late eighties, the West generally issued reprimands to the Slovenes or the Croats, while the Serb crackdown on Albanians in Kosovo went largely ignored. It threw its full weight behind Belgrade and Marković, even though his policies were ineffectual. Regrettably, the West failed to align itself with the democratic forces against the Serb centrists. Perhaps they feared a breakup of the federal state that might in turn set an example for the USSR, where Moscow was then struggling with democratic movements in the Baltic republics. After war began in 1991, the West, i.e., European Community representatives, attempted a solution through diplomatic intervention. They bungled, and ultimately failed. The war moved to Croatia; even Dubrovnik, the tourist mecca, was bombarded. But the West chose not to act. What is

worse, for Meier, is that when the war reached Bosnia (beyond the scope of this book) the West relegated its responsibility to the United Nations. The result was catastrophic.

This book is a translation from German of Meier's *Wie Jugoslawien verspielt wurde*,¹ first published in 1995, and widely acclaimed in Europe. The English edition is somewhat abridged, and allusions to evidence made known after 1995 are included. The book has a useful chronology of events (from 1980 to early 1992), two maps, a glossary of acronyms, and a bibliography of works primarily in German, Slovene, or Serbo-Croatian—therefore of minimal value to the English-language-only reader. The work is extensively footnoted.

Meier, it should be noted, is Swiss, a journalist and an old Yugoslavia hand that reported from the area for nearly 35 years, most recently for the German paper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (1975–93). He writes as a contemporary observer, an eye witness to events, incorporating historical background into his story when appropriate and with great effect. He knows the area and its politics extremely well, having begun his education in the 1950s as a doctoral candidate preparing a dissertation on Yugoslavia's new economic system. For this book he supplemented his journalistic reports, including numerous and regular interviews with key political figures, with archival material (documents of the federal presidium and the Central Committee of the LCY, and also from the archives of the Republic of Slovenia). His narrative is crisp and to the point, stressing what is essential. It is also well organized and dense with information. It is clear why the earlier edition of his book was so well received by its European readers. He can almost be forgiven the one factual error I found; he credits Primož Trubar rather than Jurij Dalmatin with the first Slovene translation of the Bible (1584). Trubar, of course, was responsible for the first Slovene catechism and first Slovene primer (printed in 1550).

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¹ Viktor Meier, *Wie Jugoslawien verspielt wurde* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995).