

Sabrina P. Ramet. *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the War for Kosovo* Third edition. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999. vii + 374 pp., \$26.00 (paper). ISBN: 0813390346.

There are two ways to look at Yugoslavia and what happened to it after Tito's death in 1980. One is from Belgrade's perspective, the other from outside the capital. Many that have written about events of the late-eighties and nineties have assumed the Belgrade point of view, not unlike those Soviet experts, viewing the USSR from Moscow, many of whom had little notion of what was going on in Ukraine, a Soviet republic of more than fifty million people—never mind the smaller Baltic states that were already in turmoil in early 1991. Many Soviet observers had no clue why Lithuania was in revolt, nor did they expect it to be more than a passing aberration. This is so because in modern states there is a built-in bias toward largeness. The preference goes back to the 19th century (especially among liberals), when largeness was viewed as politically and economically positive, and also as a confirmation of the ideal of progress. Thus, in the post-World War II period, the prevailing argument was not about big versus small states. The argument was about how to build and run big states—either capitalistically or communistically. Big was still the goal—never mind the provinces; they would adapt. That is largely why the West backed Belgrade (and Moscow) in the troubles of the late-eighties and early nineties, and this is what influenced the thinking of many prominent “Yugoslavia experts” when they wrote about the demise of the former Yugoslavia.

Not so Sabrina Ramet, a professor of international studies at the University of Washington, whose book is being reviewed here. Already in the early eighties, Ramet looked carefully at the workings of the Yugoslav federal system. In *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia*¹ first published in 1984 and updated and reissued in 1992, the author focused on how the republics and provinces were interacting, already concluding in 1984 that Yugoslav unity was in real trouble. Administrative reforms of the late sixties and early seventies, particularly the 1974 Constitution, had initiated a decentralization of

¹ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962–1991* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992).

the country. The republics of Yugoslavia had clearly begun to act more like separate units, their outlooks increasingly shaped by nationalism. The crises of the late eighties only accelerated the process. To Ramet's credit, the conclusions of the 1984 edition of the book held; the second edition extended the chronology, and basically confirmed the author's central thesis that Yugoslavia, in fact, had been breaking into its component parts.

The idea of governmental "legitimacy" is the theme that loosely weaves together the chapters of *Balkan Babel*. Ramet maintains that whether a state survives is dependent upon whether its people accept its authority to rule and whether its power is perceived as being legitimate. The author's conclusion is that Yugoslavia was never really a legitimate state; that, in fact, it began falling apart as soon as it was created in 1918. Ample examples of challenges to governmental legitimacy are provided for the period of the monarchy and the years of World War II, as well as for the decades under communist rule. Yet, according to Ramet, challenges to legitimacy can survive obstacles in times of economic prosperity in a state ruled by a firm arbiter/referee such as Tito had been. Rapid economic decline and the deaths of Tito and the Slovene Edvard Kardelj—communist Yugoslavia's ideologist—however, sealed the fate of Yugoslavia. Questioning the system's legitimacy would become evermore persistent during the 1980s. The goal of each national group moved toward self-rule, control over its own economy, and free cultural expression.

A most valuable section of Ramet's book lies in its center. There are four separate chapters on religion and culture (including an enlightening one on rock music), which appeared also in two earlier editions (1992, 1994) of *Balkan Babel*. The chapters on the Catholic and Serbian Orthodox Churches are especially useful. Partly, this is so because few other works on Yugoslavia even mention religion or church organizations, but also because these sections are very well done. For a sense of the historical issues that revolved around the Catholic church, the author juxtaposes two very different Croatian religious figures, Josip Jurij Strossmayer, the liberal nineteenth-century archbishop that promoted an ecumenical "Yugoslav" church, and Alojzije Stepinac, the conservative mid-twentieth-century prelate whose loyalty to Rome and his people caused the post-World War II communist regime to force him into house arrest. Ramet then sketches the history of church-state relations in the communist period, from Belgrade's break with the

Vatican in 1952, to Tito's rapprochement with Rome in 1966 and his visit to the Vatican five years later. In 1974 a new constitution was introduced, which decentralized state administration and decentralized relations with church institutions. In the republics where Catholicism was strong, Croatia and Slovenia, the church was gradually allowed greater influence. In 1986, when the Slovene archbishop Alojzij Suštar wished his flock a Merry Christmas on the radio—for the first time under communism—it was clear that Belgrade was no longer pulling the strings. In 1990, in both Croatia and Slovenia, the Catholic Church issued statements in support of democracy.

While Catholic churchmen came to support their republican leaders, the Serbian Orthodox Church did the same in Serbia in the eighties. That church had also been suppressed during the Tito era, for it had been closely associated with greater Serbism and with the previous monarchy. Many clerics had been killed in the war and many church buildings had been destroyed. After the war, agrarian reforms expropriated church lands and censors restricted church expression. Over the years the Orthodox Church slowly regained some ground, but with the ascendancy of Slobodan Milošević to power in Serbia, the church became prominent again. It was praised in *Politika*, the leading Serbian newspaper, Orthodox Christmas was celebrated in 1990, and in June 1990 Marxism was removed from the school curriculum and replaced with Orthodox religious instruction—an amazing development. The church reciprocated during the wars of the nineties by supporting “Serbian” political expansion. It was particularly supportive of the Bosnian Serb regime in Pale, headed by Radovan Karadžić.

Much of the war-time coverage relating to the churches and cultural developments are found in a separate chapter in the third section of Ramet's book. There are also chapters on the Serb-Croat war, the struggle in Bosnia, and developments in Macedonia and Slovenia since 1991. Earlier versions of these chapters appeared in the second edition of Ramet's book, where the author, using journalistic sources, provided a solid chronological survey of key events of the nineties as they were unfolding in the former Yugoslavia. In this third edition these chapters have been enlarged with information from recent publications and also from interviews conducted by Ramet.

This book ends with two chapters prepared especially for this edition, one on the Dayton peace and another on Milošević and

Kosovo. The psychological analysis of Milošević, which dominates the section on that Serbian leader, does not seem quite appropriate in the chapter it is tucked into. However, Kosovo is covered extremely well here. As a historical background, developments in Kosovo from the Dayton Peace (end of 1995) to the summer of 1999 are highlighted in capsule form: it is all one needs to know in the way of background about the Kosovo issue. Regarding the Dayton peace and, in general, the Western powers and organizations that became involved in the former Yugoslavia, the author has little good to say. For Ramet, the West failed not only the Yugoslav people, but it compromised its own principles. It ignored the Helsinki Accords, the Geneva Conventions, and the Genocide Convention of 1948. The West was incompetent, NATO was impotent, and the United Nations helped sustain the Serb war machine in Bosnia by bringing in food and supplies. Ramet has special contempt for Great Britain and France and its leaders' pro-Serbian bent.

Slovene developments are included in Ramet's chronological chapters. Slovenes in the eighties are depicted as intent on liberal economic reform, which they rightly understood also required political liberalization. Ramet characterizes this well, and also documents the intellectual revolution that gave rational substance to the Slovenes' national activity, including the establishment of political parties. The account of the 1991 war in Slovenia is sketchy, covering only the first few days and ends without a real assessment of what the encounter meant for Slovenia and also for the Yugoslav National Army. Slovenia is highlighted in a separate chapter dealing with developments since 1991. The author samples Slovene political life since independence (together with the attendant ideological squabbles) and Slovene international relations, including its touchy relations with Croatia. Also included here are developments covered in Western news reports about Slovenia. Ramet's approach is to exclude virtually nothing, sometimes leaving the reader overwhelmed. For the record, Ramet touches on everything from privatization to fishing rights in the Bay of Piran; from Slovenia's memberships in international organizations to Janez Janša's intentions with respect to the sociology professor Rudi Rizman ("a witch hunt"); from the decrease of women in government since independence to a psychological study that concludes Slovene youth are politically rightist and intolerant of ethnic and social minorities. Chronological distance, of course, will judge the long-term relevance of these matters.

This edition of *Balkan Babel* includes ten tables, a list of abbreviations (acronyms), an index, three maps, and an introduction by Ivo Banac that is essentially the same as that of the two earlier editions. The book, however, has no bibliography. Instead there is an anti-bibliography (!) in which the author reviews the reviewers of several of the better-known works on Yugoslavia and its demise. It is a strange piece, somewhat in the nature of an intellectual exercise, but of marginal use to the general reader, who is left to scour the footnotes for additional literature on the subject.

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