

**Louis Sell.** *Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. 430 pp., \$34.95 (cloth) ISBN: 0822328550, \$21.95 (paper) ISBN: 082233223X.

Sell's biography of Milošević testifies to both the shiftiness of the man and the inflammatory atmosphere that made his rise possible. The author presents an individual that is at once ruthlessly determined to climb to the top and stay in power by manipulating nationalist rhetoric, and at the same time seemingly riding a wave of spontaneous popular activism into a future he neither understands nor controls. Sell perhaps best summed up the paradox inherent in both Milošević's career and his person with the observation that "Milosevic gave a good imitation of being a charismatic leader" (181).

From the Serb leader's beginnings as a communist apparatchik, through the rush of power he first felt in 1987 at Kosovo Polje where he learned "how to tap into the powerful passion that Kosovo aroused among Serbs" (49), and finally into the Hague courtroom, Sell's book charts the jagged path Milošević ploughed through the last two decades of Yugoslav history. The narrative is aptly signposted by chapter titles such as "A New Tito?," "Man of Peace," and "War Criminal." At times the biography attempts to understand the psychology of the man, detailing his "almost unnaturally close relationship" with his wife, his difficult family history, and his supposed narcissism. At others, the book offers a privileged view of Yugoslav domestic politics and Western diplomacy at work in the Balkans during Milošević's lifetime. Despite his insider status as a former Foreign Service officer in the region, Sell is often critical of U.S. involvement in the mediation process, nor can he conceal his sympathy for his former Swedish boss, chief European negotiator for Yugoslavia Carl Bildt, whom the U.S. leadership eventually brushed aside.

One notable feature of Sell's assessment of the domestic political scene in the first years of Milošević's rise is his condemnation of Milošević's "accomplices" in the "plot against Yugoslavia." Amongst them he includes the late Croatian and Bosnian leaders, Franjo Tudjman and Alija Izetbegović, as well as the Slovene reformers that bailed out of Yugoslavia despite being "fully aware that their departure would lead to war in Croatia and Bosnia" (5). The Slovenes, Sell argues, enjoyed Milošević's support for their efforts at gaining independence because the

“secession of ethnically homogeneous Slovenia would give [Milošević] a freer hand to lop off the Serb-inhabited parts of Croatia” (115).

But Milošević’s plans with regard to Eastern Slavonia and the Serbian Krajina, as well as his relationship to the Serbs of Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, were as paradoxical as his political career. On the one hand, the support of Serbs in other republics helped—perhaps even precipitated—his rise, and their presence gave him the political leverage necessary to keep half of Tito’s Yugoslavia under his control, while on the other hand his power over them helped him to portray himself to the international community as the only man capable of effecting peace in the region. The novelty of Milošević’s politics was, ironically, that he managed to cast the old internationalist rhetoric of minority protection in an equally old nationalist light, which leads Sell to reflect on whether Milošević’s approach constituted an “ideology.” Although the result of Sell’s musings on the subject remains—perhaps necessarily—inconclusive, he does point to Milošević’s unique talent of “glorifying the Serbian past and attacking the nationalisms of the other Yugoslav peoples as anti-Serbian, revanchist, and genocidal,” thereby presenting himself as a “moderate” (182).

The fact that Milošević remains a somewhat mysterious and seemingly anomalous figure in the region’s history leads me to conclude that the ideological underpinnings of Milošević’s politics may deserve closer scrutiny. Was his the face of Eastern European reform communism so feared by Moscow after WWII? Or is Milošević’s ideology more comparable to the national communism of the other non-aligned state: Romania under Ceaușescu? Or is he a new breed of nationalist, hardened by the experience of communism, clearly aware of the power of nationalism, but no less savvy to the power of anti-nationalist rhetoric in a rapidly changing Europe? Could it be that one contributing factor to Milošević’s downfall was that his opponents learned the rhetoric, even the practice, if such exists, of “moderate” nationalism themselves and used it against him?

There is some evidence in Sell’s book to lead us to this conclusion. First there is the matter of Slovenia, which managed to slip out of Yugoslavia on the grounds that its ethnic homogeneity rendered it not only united, but also uninteresting to neighboring republics. Slovenia could have been as nationalist as it pleased but, without anyone to

victimize, it was not a good target for Milošević's finger-pointing "moderate" nationalism.

Croatia, on the other hand, with a sizeable Serb minority, could be portrayed by Milošević as victimizing its minority population; however, shortly after the international community realized that the Serbs were terrorizing the Croats, Tudjman took advantage of a window in 1995—when the world was considering air strikes against Serbian positions in Bosnia—to sweep the Serbian minority out of Croatia with his "Operation Storm." The ethnic cleansing of Croatia of its minority Serbs is faithfully criticized by Sell and others, but the fact that the country thereby won a much-coveted ethnic homogeneity is treated much as historians treat Beneš's expulsion of the Germans from Czechoslovakia after WWII; as an unfortunate, but diplomatically convenient *fait accompli*.<sup>1</sup> Tudjman was not the only one that believed that Operation Storm, "strengthened [Croatia's] position and its image" in the "new international order in the former Yugoslavia."<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Kosovo Albanians learned from watching the wars in Croatia and Bosnia that the only way to force their continued victimization into the international spotlight was to abandon obeisance to the West in the form of Rugova's strategy of passive resistance. Sell quotes one senior KLA leader as saying "We mounted a peaceful, civilized protest to fight the totalitarian rule of Milosevic.... The result is that we were ignored" (278).

The final blow to Milošević was struck at home during the 2000 elections, when the opposition united behind the only candidate that could stand up to Milošević because he fit the description of a true Serbian advocate even better than Milošević did; Vojislav Koštunica. A convinced nationalist, opponent of the NATO bombing and other foreign involvement in Serbian politics, Koštunica represented the ideology of "moderate" nationalism more perfectly than Milošević,

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<sup>1</sup> Nor does Sell deny the diplomatic appeal of ethnic cleansing in the Bosnian conflict. Although he provides a horrifying description of the massacre at Srebrenica, Sell concedes that "the fall of Srebrenica and the smaller enclave of Žepa had simplified the ethnic map of Bosnia and thereby made a diplomatic settlement easier to achieve" (234).

<sup>2</sup> From an August 19, 1995 interview with CNN correspondent Jacki Shymanski in Zagreb, <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/Bosnia/updates/august95/8-19/tudjman.html>.

Tudjman, or the KLA because, as a staunch legalist, he embodied the spirit of moderation that Milošević preached without practicing.

Sell's book, by using a tone that does not pretend definitively to "explain" either the character of Milošević or the sensitive and rapidly transforming political landscape of the former Yugoslavia, offers his readers the opportunity to reflect again on a period and a person we are not likely to grasp fully for a long time to come.

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