Introduction

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Introduction

Why did Yugoslavia fall apart? Was its violent demise inevitable? Did its population simply fall victim to the lure of nationalism? How did this multinational state manage to survive for so long? And where do we situate the short life of Yugoslavia in the long history of the twentieth century? This book tells the story of why and under which conditions Yugoslavia was created, what held the multinational state together for more than seventy years, and why it finally broke apart in violence. It is a tale of confidence and doubt, of progress and decline, of extremes and excesses, of utopia and demise.

No other European country was as colorful, multifaceted, or complex as Yugoslavia. Its turbulent history made it a byword for Balkan confusion and animosity; it stood for the backward, barbaric, and abhorrent contrast to the supposedly so civilized European continent. At the end of the nineteenth century, to cross the Danube by steamboat from the Austrian city of Semlin (Zemun) to Belgrade or travel by the Hungarian state railway over the great iron Sava Bridge to reach the train station of Bosanski Brod was to enter an exotic world that appeared both mysterious and fabulous but also at times appalling and threatening.¹ Shrouded in such mystery and foreignness, “the Balkans” were consistently written out of the European context, as unfortunately still happens occasionally even today. However, a closer look soon dispels this shroud of mystery, because the region is tightly intertwined in the timeline of Europe’s history in both good and bad ways. Although popular images and stereotypes of a backward and violence-ridden “European other” have since been debunked as a “convenient prejudice,” the idea of the region’s structural backwardness persists, without the least empirical evidence.²

In contrast, this book addresses Yugoslav history from the perspective of the major social, economic, and intellectual changes that affected all of Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and marked its transition to modern industrialized mass society. The “great acceleration” first reached Western societies but soon expanded out toward the European periphery.³ The emphasis here will not be primarily on structures of the longue durée and the unique developments in Balkan history, but on the overarching dynamics of
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change, on interrelations and interaction, and on common European features and parallels during the “long twentieth century.”

In Southeast Europe, the economy, social relations, cultural expression, mentalities, and daily life were undergoing fundamental transformation in the decades around 1900. The region also faced unanticipated challenges from the scientific-technological and economic progress of the West. Growing international competition and aggressive imperialism made it imperative to overcome backwardness as a matter of survival, in a very literal sense. It was against this background that the South Slavic idea took shape: the project of a common political future for culturally related peoples unified in a single state. After all, the liberation from foreign rule and the founding of an independent and sovereign Yugoslavia appeared to be the premise for securing a self-determined future in Europe.

Twice, in 1918 and 1945, Yugoslavia became a reality, each time with a thoroughly different political system: first as a centralized, constitutional, and parliamentary monarchy, then as a one-party socialist federation. Both models faced four fundamental long-term problems: the unresolved national question that challenged the identity and cohesion of the state; the underdevelopment and poverty in a predominantly peasant society; and the dependence on foreign political and economic powers. These three problems exacerbated the fourth, namely the enormous historical, cultural, and socioeconomic disparities between the various components of multietnic Yugoslavia, which repeatedly raised anew issues concerning political legitimacy and a suitable constitutional order.

One of the main questions addressed here is how, under these circumstances, development and progress were conceived at various times and what means were employed to pursue them. An increasing number of the elite believed that they were living in an age in which tradition, customs, patriarchy, and long-existing community relations were vanishing—and should vanish—to make way for the advantages and merits of modernity, specifically of a world of expanding technology. However, competing political forces and intellectuals embraced very different answers to the coercions, aspirations, and challenges of a dramatically changing world. Who were the agents driving social change, and how did they envision the future? What alternatives to Western modernity were discussed?

The approach adopted in this book distances itself from popular explanations of the Yugoslav problem that emphasize ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions, or incompatible and even “clashing” civilizations. Instead of notorious Balkan intractability and ancient hatreds, the argument presented here stresses the politicization of differences in twentieth-century modern mass society. Peoples, nations, and cultures are not transhistorical entities; they
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are subject to historical realities and change, and so are conflicts. A central question thus focuses on why, how, and under what conditions ethnic identity and diversity were turned into a matter of contention and by whom. Important are the interests, views, and motives of the major actors, the socioeconomic developments, and, last but not least, the cultural-historical dimensions of collective experiences, memories, and interpretations of history.

Very few scholars have yet attempted to provide a comprehensive history of Yugoslavia covering the entire twentieth century. The pickings are particularly thin in the literature of the Yugoslav successor states. Even before the wars of the 1990s, it was a tricky business to seek a common denominator among the various regional and national perspectives. Federalism, also in the realm of academia, granted each people its own way of dealing with its past, its own national images and narratives of its history. As a result, no master narrative ever evolved that was supported by all: too different, too politically laden were the interpretations and depictions. Quarrels over interpretation cut short the multivolume History of the Yugoslav Peoples at the year 1800. Likewise, the History of the Yugoslav Communist Party/League of Communists disappeared into oblivion. Nor did the historical contributions to the Encyclopedia of Yugoslavia fare any better. Since the country’s inception there has never been a standard narrative about Yugoslavia’s origins, historical development, and problems. So far, everyone attempting the task has ended up in the crossfire of criticism.

In stark contrast to the scarcity of general comprehensive works is the overabundance of books and articles dealing with the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. For the most part, they interpret Yugoslavia’s history from the perspective of its bloody demise, analyze its congenital defects, and characterize the creation of the South Slavic state as artificial in order to underscore the inevitability of its failure. Yet Yugoslavia cannot be explained only by the way it began or the way it ended. The state existed for a good seventy years, which raises the question about what held its peoples together for so long and what eventually divided them, a question that has not become obsolete since Yugoslavia fell apart. This book attempts to avoid deterministic explanations and to grasp the history of Yugoslavia as an essentially open-ended process from different thematic approaches.

Many recent studies no longer deal with Yugoslavia but concentrate entirely on its successor states. The existence of Slovenia, Croatia, or Kosovo today is interpreted retrospectively and the past is read teleologically, as if distant history was a harbinger of modern statehood. Interactions with neighbors are often presented only in the form of conflicts and wars. In the process, the Yugoslav period is reduced to a very short—albeit not completely insignificant—episode in a centuries-long national history. By contrast, the objective
of this book is to encapsulate various local and national historical perspectives and place them in relation to one another, which then relativizes many an alleged regional particularity. However, in order to maintain a balance between diversity and unity, the various republics and peoples can only be treated in an illustrative manner. In many instances, Eastern Bosnia serves as the microhistorical example, for it is the proverbial heart of Yugoslavia over which many sides have fought in the course of the twentieth century.

This book is conceived as a topically comprehensive but compact approach to a complex, almost boundless, subject whose potential for study is far from exhausted. It is based in part on my own research but primarily on a broad scope of secondary literature. Publications on specific topics and time periods are numerous, but syntheses remain few and far between, and there are many areas in which little or no research has been done. This is particularly true with regard to the post-1945 period.

Every general overview needs a perspective and a focal point that decide how to select topics and questions. No narrative, therefore, can do without condensing and generalizing. Certain subjects that are the standard narrative of Yugoslavia’s political history were kept short so as to better examine the deeper underlying socioeconomic and cultural dynamics and the daily life of common people in addition to the events and major actors. The chronological narrative alternates with cross-sectional analyses, which offers a deeper look into society and culture at a given period of time. A lack of space in the endnotes prevented the extensive citation of each important work that influenced this book. To facilitate readability, reference is often made to “Yugoslavs,” namely to citizens with no mention of their ethnic affiliation. Nationality was specified only when the way people identified themselves was relevant to explain certain contexts.

Terminology, in this context, is a real minefield. Should one speak of nations, nationalities, or ethnic groups? Did peoples speak different languages or just varieties or dialects of one common language? Notions of all these terms have changed over time, as will be discussed here, and they have been and still are a matter of political disputes.

Interpretations of the Yugoslav past are even more emotionally laden, and discussions are often conducted not with factual but with moral arguments. Opposing interpretations of history provide explosive material for political confrontation. Those who do not clearly choose one side or another quickly open themselves up to unpleasant polemics. Grounded in the fundamental principles of good academic practice, this account attempts to weigh the various perspectives against one another, even if the limited space does not permit the extensive treatment of all theories and controversies. In the spirit
of Alexis de Tocqueville, I hope to have written this book without prejudice but not without passion.

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