
Any bibliography about the former Yugoslavia contains numerous books dealing with the socialist experiment that has become more popular since the dissolution of the state in 1991. The studies tend to offer diverse explanations of what led to the disintegration of and conflict between the former republics, but in many cases the explanations are presented in a one dimensional way. The book under review, originally a set of essays by Dennison Rusinow, now selected and edited by Gale Stokes, steps forward by contributing in an original way to the ambiguous question of the existence and fall of the former Yugoslavia. This very detailed analysis of the no longer existent country combines a multidisciplinary approach with biographical observations, beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the country’s dissolution in 1991. The journey into the past is, in the author’s words, “partly reminiscence, partly retrospective reflections on what I thought I knew and understood at various points in those fifty years of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav history” (p. vii).

The book differs structurally from other accounts of the Yugoslav crisis. The author, who presents his observations in a form of a diary through a very detailed description of particular events, leads the reader through a passage of historical moments that remarkably affected the development of Yugoslav politics and society. Rusinow previously presented the “Yugoslav Experiment between 1948 and 1974” in detail, and with this book he completes his analysis. If the first edition presents the political structure of the former socialist state, then this volume combines observations and facts about what forced the established political framework into constant change. The development of Yugoslav politics, according to the author’s observations, has to be understood through the idea of conflict of interests that simultaneously or partially emerged through decades. The conservatives and liberals in the LCY had differing perspectives on political and economic developments of the state (p. 50). This division presented not only different orientations in the progress of Yugoslav socialism, but also a gap between old and new generations and their struggle for political power. Even though the volume provides interesting and valuable analysis, by focusing on the events to which the author was directly exposed during his stay in the region, it lacks a complete interpretation of developments inside of the former Yugoslav state. Rusinow highlights the development of student demonstrations in Serbia and the clashes within the LCY in the republic of Croatia (p. 105), but does not follow further developments in other parts of the state. Because of this perspective, the analysis lacks additional stories, such as the case of how student demonstrations corresponded to the occupation of Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, or the introduction and development of liberal politics with Stane Kavčič in Slovenia.

A valuable element of the book is how it presents the anthropological dimension of the study, which the author uses to explain changes within Yugoslav society. This is important especially in order to better understand the clashes between modern and traditional ways of living and post-Yugoslav divisions between rural and urban. Modernization of living styles and their encounters with traditional forms, as presented through Serbian feast (p. 3) or the introduction of the first supermarkets (p. 26), bring to light obstacles that are currently taken for granted. These highlights, compared to other, more factual literature about the former Yugoslav state, focus not only on mere historical fact, but also depict the huge gap that the post-war state must bridge: from a traditional agricultural society to industrialization and modernization. In this context, it should not be forgotten that new forms of the state governance (e.g. self-management system) had to correspond also with social acceptance on a broader scale.
In an inevitable and well-presented passage, the book describes the rise of nationalism and the beginning of the break-up of the state. The author, with a detailed example of developments in Kosovo, clearly demonstrates that the national question, though argued to be unimportant, remained an integral part of Yugoslav existence. The riots in the province, followed by the death of Tito and the economic crisis of the mid-1980s, led to collective existential fear. Ignition of ethnic and identity issues stemmed also from the fact that there was a huge gap in the economic development of respective republics. The book’s final section is especially interesting and remarkable, as it focuses on negotiations between political elites, and their propositions for the establishment of different political systems, which eventually, by announcing competitive multiparty elections in the late 1990s, led to a lack of interest in living in a common state. This was a clear sign of the republics taking their futures into their own hands. This observation shows the author’s ability to predict the tragic dissolution of the state, which simultaneously refuted the claim that the break-up of the former Yugoslavia was a total surprise.

_Yugoslavia: Oblique Insights and Observations_ is a valuable edition of essays in the sphere of Yugoslav studies. It not only presents major political shifts in the former state, but through their deep analysis also reveals the road that led to its dissolution. In this sense, the reader is offered oblique insights into the Yugoslav developments that essentially affected the later and final developments of the ‘South-Slavs state.’ The book is clearly written, well structured, and, by following a timeline, provides the reader with necessary information for understanding the developments within the socialist country. It focuses on the historical events that remarkably defined Yugoslav politics and forced it into constant change. These events are shown in chronological and detailed description, including the student protests, the national revival, and the calls for more liberal politics in the country. Furthermore, the volume displays the complexity of a society in which different actors and groups struggled to achieve their own goals. The reader is given an impression of a strong willingness within the Titoist’s political establishment for preserving the united state, which then diminished under the pressure of economic instability and a lack of political will among newly emerged political elites. Rusinow’s book, in this sense, provides insight not only to scholars, but also to anyone who wants to understand present anomalies and developments within the former Yugoslav republics.

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