Robert M. Hayden’s *From Yugoslavia to the Western Balkans*  
*A comment*

R. Craig Nation  
U.S. Army War College  
nationr@dickinson.edu

In 1988, the Slovene League of Communists replaced the Marxist exhortation ‘Workers of the World, Unite!’ with the slogan ‘Europe Now!’, a step toward what would become the violent dismemberment of Titoist Yugoslavia and the unraveling of postwar order in Southeast Europe. A quarter century later, Slovenia and Croatia are members of the European Union (EU), but for most other states in the region – now designated as the ‘Western Balkans’ – the process of accession has come to resemble a treadmill more than an escalator. The ‘thousand year dream’ (as Franjo Tudjman once phrased it) of joining Europe as independent states is still a dream – perhaps even a fading dream – for most of the area’s polities.

Visions of economic prosperity associated with EU accession have also faded. Against the background of an open-ended economic crisis, joblessness is uniformly – and in some cases shockingly – high. Though measures of unemployment may be tempered by the persistence of subsistence agriculture and grey labor markets in some regions, the reality of impoverishment is not. Furthermore, several of the region’s new polities still confront troubling ethnic divisions and lack the capacity for strong governance, while the blight of transnational organized crime is a challenge for nearly all. Not least, social frustrations combined with unresolved political and territorial conflicts continue to pose the risk of violent confrontations. Without a reasonable prospect of EU accession, no viable regional order has taken form to replace what was once provided by the premise of Yugoslav federalism.

The war that gave birth to the contemporary Balkans is universally regarded as a tragedy, in view of the heavy death toll, the physical and psychic casualties, and the infrastructural damage that it occasioned. It might also be regarded as such in view of the social and political consequences. The region as a whole
has been destabilized and marginalized in the larger European context. Social services and economic security have declined, and a legacy of hatred has been created that may require generations to overcome. Moreover, political fragmentation has led to the emergence of small and fragile sovereignties incapable of asserting full national autonomy, so that external powers such as the Russian Federation, Turkey, and even China now vie with the U.S. and EU for influence and leverage. Thus, to some extent, a pattern of alignment with external sponsors has reemerged – a tendency that has wrought considerable damage in the past.

Nevertheless, the situation is not entirely bleak. There is a promising and often under-estimated dynamic of inter-regional cooperation underway (Cross, Kentera, Nation and Vukadinović 2013). Legacy issues such as the Kosovo question, the controversy between Macedonia and Greece over the republic’s official name, or constitutional order in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) may each defy resolution, but none is likely to generate interstate violence. The regional status quo serves the interests of more parties than might choose to admit it, and though undesirable, may prove to be sustainable. Furthermore, the region retains inherent assets, including human resources, a favorable geo-strategic situation, and rich cultural diversity. We can therefore say that the European idea has been delayed, but not extinguished. Nonetheless, the task of reconstructing a viable regional order remains unresolved, and the legacy of the political violence unleashed during the 1990s has yet to be addressed effectively.

* * *

Much of the literature devoted to the Yugoslav War can be considered sophisticated journalism or contemporary history rather than substantial historiography, and almost all accounts are openly partisan in one direction or another. There is remarkably little consensus about how to attribute responsibility for the origins of the conflict, characterize its nature (civil war or interstate conflict), describe the strategic goals of the belligerent parties, evaluate the role of the international community, or summarize the outcomes. There is not even a general agreement about what to call the war or how to frame it chronologically. The lack of consensus reflects ongoing disagreements about what the fighting itself was all about. Personally, I prefer the designation ‘Yugoslav War’ and a time line running from 1991 into the twenty-first century, including the Kosovo conflict and Macedonian insurgency of 2001.¹ These designations rest

¹ The designation ‘Yugoslav War’ is used by Oleg Valetskii (2011).