Debate


Charles Ingrao
Purdue University, West Lafayette, USA
ingrao@purdue.edu

The parallel stories of Yugoslavia’s dissolution and the Western Powers’ refusal to intervene in the ensuing wars have been well documented by a plethora of scholarly accounts. Like this book, the great majority have unmasked Slobodan Milošević and his surrogates as the primary perpetrators in the destruction of both the federation and the lives of millions of civilians. The main titles of some – most notably James Gow’s The Triumph of the Lack of Will (1997) and Edward Simm’s Unfinest Hour (2001) – even match the sardonic wit of The Hour of Europe. Nonetheless, Josip Glaurdić’s thoroughly researched and well-written first book contributes to the body of scholarship in a number of ways. Its depth and currency may even justify his boast that “Without a doubt, this book is empirically thus far the most complete account not only of the responses of the Western foreign policy makers to Yugoslavia’s breakup, but also of the impact they had on the decisions of the principal Yugoslav actors.” (8)

It also offers a somewhat different perspective for understanding the West’s failure to intervene. Although the author correctly rejects the allegations of German responsibility, he does acknowledge the inadequacy of existing international institutions and, especially, a quantum lack of strategic interest that rendered the Western Powers unwilling to “back diplomacy with military force.” (5) Yet he argues that Western “realism” in the face of post-Cold War SFRY’s sudden loss of geostrategic significance went beyond mere passivity to the proactive obstruction of all attempts to forestall its descent into chaos and violence. Rather than evincing merely an unheroic “lack of will”, the
constituent members of the European Community (EC) and the United States effectively sided with Serbia because of the negative valence that each country attached to SFRY’s breakup. It was this pursuit of each country’s perceived self-interest, rather than mere apathy, that informed a pervasive disregard for universalist principles like democracy, international law/peace, and basic humanitarian instincts; meanwhile, righteous anger was relegated to laypeople, journalists, legislative back benchers and, occasionally, state actors from geographically remote countries who could view the unfolding tragedy without immediate regard for their own country’s national interest.

Perhaps the book’s most innovative contribution is its dual focus on developments in Yugoslavia and on the international stage as the author constructs an intricate time line that lays bare the interaction between them. Thus the narrative typically switches back and forth between events in the SFRY capitals and those international developments in the EC, US or regional trouble spots to highlight their influence on Western policy makers. The resulting analysis certainly underscores his principal argument that the EC/US focus on other, more strategically significant regions defined Western policy toward the Yugoslav republics and dictated their determination to consign it to a back burner – even after it boiled over. At least in the beginning the Soviet Union was the biggest pot of all, as the Western allies assisted Mikhail Gorbachev’s quest for an orderly perestroika. CIA reports indicated that even “the Soviets see Yugoslavia as the USSR in microcosm.” (157) Keeping the lid on SFRY’s inter-republican nationality conflicts seemed essential to preventing far more perilous developments among their Soviet counterparts. Whereas EC policy makers – including Germany’s leaders – initially appreciated the need to preserve Yugoslavia at all costs, they were pursuing different agendas that conformed more closely to their own perceived national interest. The specter of two world wars impelled Britain and, especially, France to impede Germany’s reemergence as Europe’s dominant power, both out of jealousy and apprehension that Yugoslavia’s demise would enhance Germany and shift the “center of gravity” (213) eastward to Berlin. Nor were British policy makers keen to be drawn more deeply into the EC at the expense of the island kingdom’s cherished sovereignty and independence. Instead, they sought to avoid Europe’s embrace by minimizing the EC’s role of international intervention and relying instead on US leadership.

London’s studied subservience to the US thus enabled Washington to set the tone without expending too much time, energy and political capital in managing the Yugoslav crisis. Indeed, having won the Cold War and emerged as the world’s sole superpower, President George H. W. Bush and his advisors sought only stability (and, I would add, the maintenance of a worldwide status quo that locked in the hegemony of all things American). The US was,