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## From First 'True' Yugoslavs to Last Yugoslavs. Paradoxes of Socialist Youth Politics and Culture in the 1980s

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### Abstract:

In her analysis of the political and cultural activity of Yugoslavs born between 1954 and 1969, the author contends that there was a genuine support for a more liberal and democratic version of socialism, due to the decentralized nature and diplomatic positioning of Yugoslavia. Three main characteristics defined their outlook: economic and political crisis, internationalist and European aspirations, and new understanding of what it meant to be a Yugoslav citizen. With its combination of archival sources, press materials, public surveys, and oral history interviews, the book offers an important contribution to research on youth agency in politics and culture.

### How to cite:

Baković, Nikola: "From First 'True' Yugoslavs to Last Yugoslavs. Paradoxes of Socialist Youth Politics and Culture in the 1980s [Review on: Spaskovska, Ljubica: The Last Yugoslav Generation. The Rethinking of Youth Politics and Cultures in Late Socialism. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.]" In: KULT\_online 53 (2018)

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## From First 'True' Yugoslavs to Last Yugoslavs. Paradoxes of Socialist Youth Politics and Culture in the 1980s

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Spaskovska, Ljubica: *The Last Yugoslav Generation. The Rethinking of Youth Politics and Cultures in Late Socialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. 240 pages, 75 GBP. ISBN 978-1-5261-0631-5.

**Abstract:**

In her analysis of the political and cultural activity of Yugoslavs born between 1954 and 1969, the author contends that there was a genuine support for a more liberal and democratic version of socialism, due to the decentralized nature and diplomatic positioning of Yugoslavia. Three main characteristics defined their outlook: economic and political crisis, internationalist and European aspirations, and new understanding of what it meant to be a Yugoslav citizen. With its combination of archival sources, press materials, public surveys, and oral history interviews, the book offers an important contribution to research on youth agency in politics and culture.

The topic of youth culture in socialist societies has been in historians' focus for quite some time, resulting in many works concentrating on different countries that once belonged to this bloc. A similarly themed 'take' on socialist Yugoslavia is brought by Ljubica Spaskovska, Associate Research Fellow at Exeter University, in her plainly titled monograph *The Last Yugoslav Generation*. Spaskovska counters the fatalist view of Yugoslav history as the story of the inevitable demise of an artificial political creation, the view which, despite having been more or less consensually disregarded in international academia, still figures in much of the native scholarship and public sphere. Her primary argument is that, had the political and cultural youth elite in 1980s Yugoslavia held sway, not only was the breakup of the federation avoidable, but there was genuine support for a more liberal and democratic version of socialism in many segments of Yugoslav youth (p. 2). The author contends that, unlike in more rigid systems elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Yugoslav youth politics was characterized by a surprising

diversity and openness to new ideas and reform proposals. This is, according to Spaskovska, because of the country's decentralized nature and diplomatic positioning between the Blocs.

Formalizing the last Yugoslav generation Spaskovska considers people born between 1954 and 1969 (aptly calling them "88-ers", parodying the much more famous 68-ers). She relies on the staple theoretical work on generations of Karl Mannheim, and makes it outright clear that her portrayal of 88-ers is somewhat selective, since she focuses on those sections of youth that were either active in the main youth organization (the League of the Socialist Youth), or prominent in metropolitan cultural and art scenes. Through combination of archival sources, press materials, public surveys and oral history interviews with the most notable representatives of urban youth elite, she outlines three main characteristics that defined the outlook of 88-ers: the overwhelming economic and political crisis of the 1980s, internationalist and European aspirations, and a new understanding of what it meant to be a Yugoslav, increasingly expressed in terms of citizenship and the pertaining rights and identities (p. 5).

The institutional setup of the Yugoslav "youth sphere" is outlined through the depiction of the highly-decentralized League of the Socialist Youth, which followed the country's de facto confederal division into eight constituents. Despite limited conditions for political plurality, the author argues that the very administrative fractioning of the system, coupled with Yugoslav openness to western cultural influences, meant that youth politics in late socialism were far from monolithic. The initial wariness of youth functionaries towards alternative movements gradually gave place to their inclusion, which in turn increased the popularity and massiveness of the League. Hence, precisely those segments of youth that criticized certain facets of the system used that very system to create their own "pockets of freedom" (p. 65). Youth criticism of the Yugoslav system also entailed the revision of officially sanctioned historical narrative, hereby exemplified by two highly popular youth ritual formats: youth labor drives and the Youth Relay Baton. Although both rituals saw their demise by the end of the decade due to a loss of legitimacy, the author also notes a sense of regret and nostalgia in oral testimonies. Young Yugoslavs did not stop at mere criticism, but simultaneously tried to offer concrete ideas for social reform through a complex web of activist networks, such as the anti-nuclear movement, LGBT and feminist activism, or conscientious objectors' initiatives. In this regard, Slovenian youth organization proved most open-minded, actively incorporating these alternative movements within its sphere, including the most notorious ones, such as *Neue slowenische Kunst* or the band Laibach.

In the long run, however, even such a reinvigorated youth scene proved insufficient to preserve the federation or to reform socialism. Spaskovska points out three main reasons for this failure (p. 188-189): eventually it was not the 88-ers who were in charge of the political situation in the country, but

the older generation with different worldviews; the demise of the League of Communists and the League of Socialist Youth, which were the main avenues for articulating leftist liberal agendas; and lastly, Slovenian youth activists, as the most avant-garde Yugoslav faction, gradually withdrew to their parochial intra-Slovene concerns, abandoning any effort to reform the wider federal framework.

What distinguishes the last Yugoslav generation from other 'last generations' of socialism is the paradox that they were also the first 'truly' Yugoslav generation, and Spaskovska offers a well-researched and stylistically refined analysis of their political and cultural legacy to first post-Yugoslav generations. The book's only shortcoming is that the author occasionally presents a somewhat romanticized picture of this generation, taking at face value certain politically and morally contentious acts, such as Laibach's coqueting with Nazi imagery, or implicitly orienting the insistence of Slovenian youth on their Europeaness as antithesis to Yugoslavia's non-aligned diplomatic orientation. Nevertheless, the book offers an important contribution not only to the steadily diverging field of Yugoslav studies, but more generally to the discussions on youth agency in politics and culture. As a prospect for future research, it would be exciting to see the other side of the coin of Yugoslav youngsters, namely, those segments of 88-ers that Spaskovska did not include in her analysis – the provincial, rural, religious and nationalist-inclined voices among the young generation. Although counterfactual history was not its aim, Spaskovska's monograph does inspire thinking about what would have (not) been if the generation of 88-ers had had the chance to make decisions in Yugoslavia at the time. Whatever the answer to that question is, the very fact that it emerged after reading this book points to its actuality and intellectual as well as political importance for anyone interested in youth activism, whether in the past or in the present.

**German Abstract:**

**Von den ersten ‚echten‘ zu den letzten Jugoslaw\_innen. Paradoxien der sozialistischen Jugendpolitiken und -kulturen in den 1980ern**

In ihrer Analyse zu politischen und kulturellen Aktivitäten der zwischen 1954 und 1969 geborenen Jugoslaw\_innen, verweist die Autorin auf Bestrebungen dieser Generation nach einem Sozialismus mit mehr Freiheiten und Demokratie. Sie sieht dies zudem verstärkt durch die Dezentralisierung und diplomatische Äquidistanz Jugoslawiens. In Folge charakterisieren drei Hauptmerkmale die Weltanschauung dieser Generation: wirtschaftliche und politische Krise, internationale und europäische Ansprüche, sowie eine neue Auffassung jugoslawischer Identität. Durch die Kombination von Archivdokumenten, Presseberichten, Erhebungsdaten und Zeitzeug\_innen-Interviews stellt dieses Buch einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Jugendforschung in den Feldern Politik und Kultur dar.

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