

In Search of New Perspectives: Rethinking the Dissolution of Yugoslavia

Elizabeth McNeill

Abstract:

The edited volume *Debating the End of Yugoslavia* by Florian Bieber, Armina Galijaš, and Rory Archer represents the most recent assessment of the state of the art and new research directions concerning the scholarly debate on the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It comprises selected papers from a conference held at the University of Graz in 2011. The volume consists of multidisciplinary contributions by scholars with an expertise in Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav space, examining the existing literature from the region and beyond and identifying particular research gaps. Furthermore, the volume explores the new methodological and source-based approaches in the study of the end of Yugoslavia.

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The dissolution of Yugoslavia has been studied extensively. One can get lost in a flood of academic and non-academic work of a diverse quality while trying to grasp different aspects of the dissolution, the consequent wars, and the transition processes in the post-Yugoslav space. However, there have been many fewer publications discussing the scholarly work that has been done.

The recent volume edited by Florian Bieber, Armina Galijaš, and Rory Archer is an attempt to fill the gap by shedding light on the state of the scholarly debate on the Yugoslav dissolution and examining the potential new research directions instead of discussing the dissolution itself. Accordingly, the volume is structured into two parts, one discussing the state of the research and the other exploring the new directions from the perspective of new sources and new methodological approaches. The volume is a result of a conference held at the University of Graz in 2011 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

As Florian Bieber states in the introduction to the volume, the main message of the book is that the scholarship on the dissolution of Yugoslavia has not reached an end and the literature still contains blind spots (p.1). Bieber explains the goal of the volume clearly, not attempting to close the debate or solve the disputes, but to "highlight the importance of the debate and the need for a sober scholarly assessment of a subject that remains fraught with emotional and biased interpretations" (p.6).

Although the first part of the volume focuses on the existing research, at the same time the chapters engage in discussion of the potential research perspectives. The contributions come from a wide range of disciplines, such as history, political science, and sociology, taking both international scholarship and that arising from within the former Yugoslavia into consideration.

Eric Gordy opens the discussion on the state of the research by identifying the limitations in the scholarship on the dissolution of Yugoslavia. He recognizes the prevailing top-down approach as the main issue, which leads to a state- and elite-centrism. While Gordy does not cite many of the works he discusses (something that would have been useful for a first-hand look at the debate), he still provides a clear and well-argued overview of the limited scope of the

existing research. Furthermore, he proposes a turn to the social actors and long/short social changes as an alternative focus, which leads him to discussing potential approaches for future research.

In his contribution from a historian's perspective, Josip Glaurdić raises the very important issue of poor scholarship and historiographical practice within the existing research. He discusses the problems of factual inaccuracies and biases in the selection and treatment of sources, illustrating his arguments with the numerous examples of shocking mistakes in citing primary and secondary sources. His essay proves that even though source critique is a prime field of work for historians, even in the most frequently cited literature it has not been executed properly. Glaurdić attempts to find the reasons for this tendency, naming the large amount of diverse and contradicting sources as one of them. Therefore researchers new to the field turn immediately to the secondary literature, which, of course, is not necessarily a good source and sometimes leads to perpetuation of myths. Secondly, this problem can be traced to the ideological agenda of contemporary historians in the post-Yugoslav space. Ultimately, Glaurdić's paper is also a plea for a solid scholarship of contemporary history, one which should not take shortcuts regarding the sources.

Hilde Katrine Haug focuses closely on debating the end of Yugoslavia in contemporary Serbia, emphasizing the lack of consensus and contested narratives. Her contribution to this volume deals with the issue of transitional justice and the politicized debates in Serbian society, rather than focusing on the state of the research. Although she provides the initially proposed literature review, her essay does not explain how it became a non-topic for researchers. Nevertheless, her case study of the failed Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Serbia represents the most detailed analysis conducted so far. She examines the Commission's establishment and the political setting, its work, official documents, and public discourses surrounding it.

What are the innovative directions with regard to the research of the dissolution of Yugoslavia? The second part of the volume confirms its main message and builds on the first part by introducing further research perspectives. The authors in this section offer new or recently emerged methodological and source-based perspectives, such as the multiperspectival viewpoints both 'from above' and 'from below', new archival documents and court materials as sources, and a turn to the history of everyday life and social/cultural history of Yugoslavia. The present essays exemplify this by providing their own case studies as impressive illustration.

Debating the End of Yugoslavia came at the right moment; reflecting on more than twenty years of scholarship on the dissolution of Yugoslavia, it is the much-needed critical assessment of what has been done. On the whole, it is an important contribution not only to the study of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, but to the general research on the region. Its greatest advantage is its interdisciplinary approach and the coverage of both international and domestic scholarship from the former Yugoslavia, with the authors providing expertise from the region. It is a valuable resource, one which will be equally useful to those already researching the region as

well as to outsiders to the field. In the end it is a book for anyone who would like to gain insight in those scholarly debates and new research possibilities.