

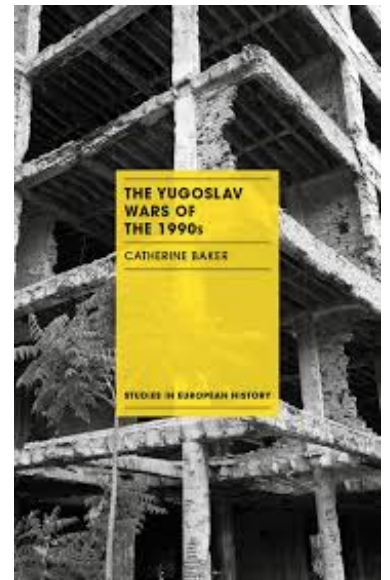
Book Review: The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s by Catherine Baker

*In **The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s**, Catherine Baker provides an up-to-date account of the varied interpretations of the origins, causes and consequences of the conflicts. In inviting readers to reconsider a number of assumptions regarding the Yugoslav Wars and indicating where further research is required, this book is an excellent overview that adeptly traverses a wide range of topics, writes **Lenneke Sprik**.*

***The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s*. Catherine Baker. Palgrave Macmillan. 2015.**

Without us even realising it, many of our thoughts on the history of Yugoslavia and the 1990s conflict may depend on the perceptions presented to us by the authors of the books that we have been reading. Catherine Baker, lecturer in Twentieth-Century History at the University of Hull, challenges many of these assumptions by providing the reader with an extensive comparison of different interpretations of the Yugoslav Wars and their origins.

In *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s*, Baker discusses the history of each of the individual conflicts that took place in the former Yugoslavia and the different narratives that exist regarding them. In addition, she touches upon the interdependent relationship between the conflict and the region's cultural and linguistic divides as well as the influence of external actors like the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the international community on the development of the conflict and the post-conflict reconstruction of the region. Baker excels in giving the reader an overview of the multitude of debates that exist in relation to this topic. This book would thus be of use to a broad audience ranging from postgraduate students to experts as it invites readers to reconsider certain assumptions they may have regarding the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.



Whereas other works on this topic usually choose one angle through which to analyse the root causes of the conflicts, Baker successfully assesses different explanations. I was particularly curious to see how the break-up of Yugoslavia, discussed in Chapter Two, would be explained: was it a matter of evolving nationalism, the economic crisis that unfolded in the 1980s or was it the development of an elitist-populist power struggle that introduced the downfall of the republic of Yugoslavia? Although Baker deems the rise of Slobodan Milošević's power from 1987 important, she stresses the additional significance of structural and institutional factors in accounting for the break-up of Yugoslavia. In this respect, she interestingly points to a striking gap in existing literature regarding the role of the public and institutions in cooperating with Milošević (37).



Image Credit: War Damage on Sarajevo Buildings (Michal Huniewicz)

Another narrative thread throughout the book is the question of to what extent nationalism and ethnic identities shaped the conflicts. Baker makes the arguable point that 'nationalism was not a force of nature; it was a human invention which could be traced back to a particular historical moment in late modern Europe and North America' (56). This viewpoint may also explain the focus on ethnic identities and Baker's attempt to refute the idea that the conflict in Bosnia was a 'triangular conflict between three ethnic nations' (63): namely, the Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats. She believes that the conflict was fought for the purpose of 'exerting power over territory in the name of an ethnically-defined nation' (64), but does not believe that it was ethnic violence in itself.

Although this point of view is certainly refreshing, I was not entirely convinced as to whether an actual distinction can be made between ethnic violence that automatically arises from within a population and ethnic violence that may be influenced by political or economic factors. Surely one could argue that Yugoslav history shows that the 'Slavs' and 'Turks' have taken opposite sides for centuries? Viewed in this light, the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo seem to fit into existing historical narratives of which the 1389 battle of 'Kosovo Polje' between allied forces led by the Serbian Prince Lazar and the Ottoman Empire is a good example. However, throughout the book Baker rightly points to the tendency to dismiss those narratives that do not fit the mainstream picture: for example, of friendly relations between people of different ethnicities and the peaceful co-existence of the three ethnic groups in Yugoslavia.

In Chapter Five, dealing with the Kosovo War (1998-99) and its aftermath, Baker returns to the question of ethnic identity and whether ethnic divisions, or the perception of how the separation of ethnicities was created, should be studied in relation to these conflicts. Also very relevant is her question with regards to socialism and the breakdown of communism: what is their relationship with ethnic identification? Later in the book, she highlights that the end of 'Yugoslav state socialism' (96) has been neglected in understanding the Yugoslav situation, and that nation-building and post-war reconstruction requires us to look at the fact that the region was 'simultaneously post-conflict and post-socialist' (97).

The most valuable and novel contribution to the literature on the Yugoslav Wars, however, is Chapter Eight, which deals with culture and language during and after the Wars. Baker describes the differences between the Yugoslav languages in detail and how the perceptions of these differences changed over the twentieth century. Most striking is

the idea, posited by Baker, that 'certain cultural forms, derived from folk culture, enabled violence' (118). While many will be familiar with the role of myths and poetry in the Yugoslav Wars, the significance of music has not been frequently discussed. Baker refers to 'turbo folk', a type of music that combines modern dance or pop music with the traditional folk sounds, and the different interpretations given to it. Turbo folk is either recognised as 'glorifying a nationalist patriarchal culture by objectifying women and romanticizing organized crime' or linked to 'the emergence of very similar pop-folk styles across post-socialist south-east Europe as a whole' (119). Later, hip hop would become an anti-nationalist genre in the post-war music scene. Most interesting here, and very relevant to understanding 'post-conflict Yugoslavia', is the reference to Tim Judah's recognition of the development of a 'Yugosphere' (122). This term is used to describe the development of social, cultural and economic connections that were not limited to each of the newly established states, but were common to all ex-Yugoslav states. The particular fact that Kosovar Albanians were not part of this Yugosphere perhaps eloquently reflects the difficult relationship between Albanians and the other 'Yugoslav' nations.

Although Baker does not necessarily provide us with answers to all the questions raised in this insightful book, simply asking them triggers the curiosity of the reader and may ultimately encourage further research into the topics that Baker defines as being understudied thus far. Overall, *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s* is a valuable contribution to debates on the origins of the conflicts and provides an excellent overview of the different perspectives held in this regard. It particularly deserves praise for the wide scope of topics discussed and its critical account of ethnic identities and nationalism as providing the breeding ground for ethnic conflict.

Lenneke Sprik is a PhD candidate in Public International Law at the University of Glasgow. She holds master degrees in both International Relations and Military Law and has been researching ethnic conflict, nationalism, military interventions and military law for several years. Lenneke also has a specific interest and expertise in the former Yugoslavia and its history, cultures and languages. Lenneke tweets @LennekeSprik, and you can find more about her research [here](#). [Read more reviews by Lenneke Sprik](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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