

Book Review: Debating the End of Yugoslavia edited by Florian Bieber, Armina Galijaš, and Rory Archer

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Overall this book is a timely addition to studies on not only the dissolution of Yugoslavia, but the concepts related to it – both in the ways they have shaped discussions over the decades, and in their potential to impact future scholarly discourse on the region. The accessibility of the volume coupled with the variety of subjects tackled allows it to be of interest to students, scholars, and even those with passing interest in the region, which is not something managed often in works aimed primarily at academic audiences, writes Kristen Perrin.

Debating the End of Yugoslavia. Edited by Florian Bieber, Armina Galijaš, and Rory Archer. Ashgate. 2014.

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One of the most frustrating aspects of researching the former Yugoslavia from the comfort of a university library is the overwhelming amount of books to be encountered on what seem to be the same sets of events. Additionally problematic for the student are the frequency of publications from the mid-nineties, which, while they carry with them the benefit of immediacy in the face of the topics they tackle, can have no room for context within the numerous debates that followed. These debates are something that can take the researcher years to fully track down, and efforts to place them into any organised and concrete space are surprisingly rare. The recent series in Southeast European Studies published by Ashgate has made space for a redefined focus on the former Yugoslavia, with several new titles appearing this year that address very important research. Among these is *Debating the End of Yugoslavia*, edited by Florian Bieber, Armina Galijaš, and Rory Archer.

This book is a much needed addition, as its aims are more than its title suggests. Indeed, many titles on what can be referred to as the ‘end’ of Yugoslavia could claim to navigate the surrounding debates, but this volume undertakes the rather large task of looking at where scholarship on the subject has evolved – how it has changed the nature of the way we see the space known as the former Yugoslavia – and identifies paths for future research on the subject. Additionally, it addresses something that other volumes either ignore completely or only admit between the lines – that studies on the subject of the collapse of the former Yugoslavia can contain within them, as Florian Bieber states in the introduction, ‘emotional and biased interpretations.’ The difficulty with this goes beyond the obvious implications of such interpretations, in that the more problematic of these are not always as easy to identify as one might think, and the repercussions can be felt outside the walls of academia.

Sabrina Ramet tackles this head-on in the opening of chapter 3, ‘Disputes about the Dissolution of Yugoslavia and its Wake’, in referring to the book *Balkan Ghosts* as an ‘international best-selling pot-boiler’. While she delves briefly into the reasons for this, the passing description might lead a reader who is new to the topic to wonder more about this publication and its ramifications than the true focus of her chapter, which is a relatively clear-cut description of six particular types of disputes relating to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. She identifies, in turn, disputes about the nature of the conflict, the origin of the war, culpability of those involved, the atrocities themselves, the conduct of the war, and intervention. It is a helpful categorisation that is straightforward and brief (considering the list of subjects described), and allows a side-by-side look at debates that are often intertwined, which gives the reader fresh perspective on them. Here and there, however, are small matters that detract from the strength of the chapter, such as the discussion of the International Court of Justice’s ruling of genocide in Srebrenica followed by a definition from the Cassel Pocket English Dictionary rather than an inclusion of the official definition of genocide used by the ICJ, although the point remains the same and the definitions are quite similar. A larger issue arises with the inclusion of weighty criticisms of the postmodern position on truth in the face of history that only appear near the end of the

chapter and leave the reader in the midst of a deep discussion that would be better started with the chapter itself, to frame the information discussed earlier within the philosophies behind this take on them.

There is an interesting breadth of information tackled by this volume, and several chapters deal with issues not often addressed. Chapter 9 in particular, in which Rory Archer looks at the subject of social inequality within the context of Yugoslavia's dissolution, offers much needed perspective on the intricacies of Yugoslav life that have been frequently overlooked. Archer sets out the discussion by giving the reader convincing reasons as to why this subject is important, among them the issue of an overemphasis on subjects such as consumerism, leisure, and social memory, at the expense of examining what he refers to as 'the experience of social precariousness' as key to understanding the context surrounding the dissolution. His examination of social class in the 'Yugoslav context' makes a clear case for conceiving the specifics of Yugoslav society as not truly fitting within the outlines of the Marxist framework, and his emphasis on the problems of assuming this might be possible make for an engaging discussion of the limitations of many existing studies of social class. His examples are both interesting and frequent, and he tackles not only concrete studies on inequalities in areas such as housing, but those that have looked at data on perceptions of inequalities before the country's dissolution.

While the first section of the book ('The State of the Debate') is lengthier than the second ('New Directions in Research'), the two sections balance well. Particularly fascinating is the approach offered by Ljubica Spaskovska in chapter 15, 'The Yugoslav Chronotype: Histories, Memories and the Future of Yugoslav Studies'. Here, Spaskovska takes a creative philosophical step in applying Bakhtin's concept of 'chronotype' to the Yugoslav experience, to better examine the role of spatiotemporal frameworks on what she (and others) have termed 'the Yugoslav project'. Her goal is a noble one – to avoid focusing on these subjects 'through the prism of conflict, anomaly and destruction or by forming teleological arguments.' Her arguments, while complex and often spanning a wealth of theory, are well-laid and innovative in their applications.

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Kristen Perrin is in her final year of PhD study at University College London in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Her primary research interests are in theories of conflict, genocide, transitional justice and human rights. Her thesis examines transcripts from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), applying a mixture of sociolinguistics and social psychology to witness testimony from both victims and accused. [Read more reviews by Kristen.](#)

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