Book Review: Transnationalism, Diaspora and Migrants from the Former Yugoslavia in Britain by Gayle Munro

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In **Transnationalism, Diaspora and Migrants from the Former Yugoslavia in Britain***,* **Gayle Munro** *offers an ethnographic account based on 200 narratives of migrants from the former Yugoslavia to Britain, focusing particularly on how their diverse experiences unsettle the categories through which migration is often understood. This short book is an important contribution to the small but growing field of research looking at this complex migration history, writes* **Catherine Baker***.*

***Transnationalism, Diaspora and Migrants from the Former Yugoslavia in Britain*. Gayle Munro. Routledge. 2017.**

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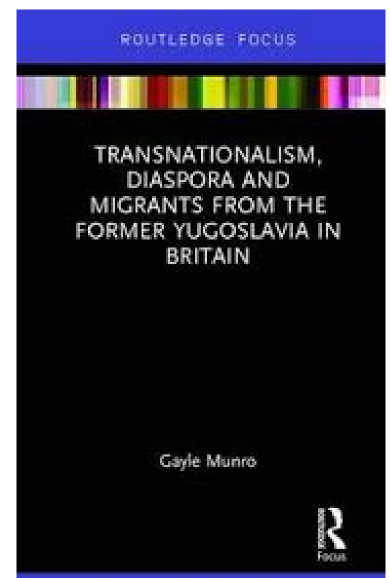

Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav migration to Britain did not begin with, but was thoroughly changed by, the collapse of Yugoslav state socialism, the displacement of millions from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo during the Yugoslav wars and the effects of the economic sanctions to which Slobodan Milošević exposed the people of Serbia and Montenegro.

While the 1991 UK census recorded 13,846 residents of England, Scotland and Wales who had been born in what was still, as far as the British government was concerned, Yugoslavia, by 2001 there were 47,410. And, as Gayle Munro suggests in this study based on more than 200 migrants' narratives, the total size of post-Yugoslav communities in Britain is likely to be closer to 137,500, at least once people born in Britain with ethnic heritage from the Yugoslav region are taken into account.

This middling-size community is not only subdivided by ethnicity – the reason why many post-Yugoslav migration studies only follow a particular ethnic diaspora rather than the more diffuse collective subject of this book. It is also subdivided by the time of people's first departure from the Yugoslav region, their reasons for leaving as officially recognised in migration status and the much more complex personal motivations that Gayle Munro found unsettled the clear categories of migration policy and theory with which she began her research.

Many of the people who retold their experiences of moving to and settling in Britain to Munro in *Transnationalism, Diaspora and Migrants from the Former Yugoslavia in Britain* have much more fraught and contingent relationships to categories such as 'migrant' and 'refugee' than immigration policy would ever recognise with its rigid distinctions between victims of persecution and migrants from choice. This ranges from Bosnians who have abandoned the identity of 'refugee' as soon as they no longer had to prove it, other Bosnians who made that same identity a source of personal strength to people like the woman who said that she had come to Britain through a 'love story' and did not consider herself a 'migrant' at all.

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The problem of categorising or even defining migration from the Yugoslav region to Britain connects the five chapters of Munro's short book, which cover the differing contexts of migrants' departure; the equally varied contexts – depending on how and when they came to Britain – of their arrival and reception; their own identifications and disidentifications as different types of border-crossing people; the 'dreams' and psychological questions associated with migration; and the 'cultural banks and beacons' (such as language, cultural festivals and social spaces) through which they express their transnational and diasporic experience.

Conceptually, the book sets out to show that neither the concepts of 'transnationalism' nor 'diaspora' are sufficient for capturing the multiplicity of post-Yugoslav border-crossing experiences (or, Munro suggests, anybody else's, including the millions of people who have left or fled the Middle East and North Africa since the war in Iraq, the Arab revolutions and the Syrian civil war).

'Transnationalism', Munro argues, has acquired restrictive dimensions in some migration studies literature and might, if over-applied to a post-Yugoslav context, inadvertently attach migrants to nationalist politics they had actually fled from (this was important enough to Munro for her not to use the word 'transnational' in advertising for participants). Furthermore, 'diaspora', though a much more common everyday word for all Munro's interviewees, can have essentialist implications about the fixity of ethnic identity, which an 'academic context' (5) might seek to avoid and yet still represent as a social fact.

Even as the book fulfils its own purpose of rethinking the boundaries of categories such as 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism', 'migrant' and 'refugee', some of its most insightful contributions come from resonances that emerge with recent anthropological studies of the post-Yugoslav region itself ,with its many interview extracts permeated with the contradictions and emotions of decisions to leave or stay.

In particular, the 'disempowerment' (35) of many migrants and refugees in the face of temporary protection policies (which foresaw them having to return to a reconstructed homeland after the war) and long waits for the Home Office to determine their immigration status as well as the psychological mode of imagining an alternative present – the lives they would have led if the wars had not happened – that overshadows some migrants' everyday experience, resonate with the sense of yearning and waiting that the anthropologist Stef Jansen finds in post-war Bosnia.

Though this book does not trace 'translocal' ties in the same way as Haris Halilovich's *Places of Pain* (2013) to which it does refer, its narratives from many 1990s migrants in Britain echo the feelings of residents in a Sarajevo

apartment complex whom Jansen, in his own book *Yearnings in the Meantime* (2015), understood to feel ‘collectively stuck in a time warp where nothing seemed to be as it should be’, two decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement.

Albeit from different locations and for different structural reasons, this parallel suggests that feelings of disempowerment among migrants as well as those who returned or stayed behind might themselves be part of a translocal circuit. While giving only one short window into its interviewees’ lifelong experiences, let alone those of over 100,000 people in Britain who belong to one or more post-Yugoslav communities, *Transnationalism, Diaspora and Migrants from the Former Yugoslavia in Britain* adds to the small but growing number of studies of this complicated migration history.

Catherine Baker is a Lecturer in 20th Century History at the University of Hull. She is the author of *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991* (Ashgate, 2010) and, with Michael Kelly, *Interpreting the Peace: Peace Operations, Conflict and Language in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Her research interests include nationalism and cultural politics in the post-Yugoslav region and elsewhere. Read more by Catherine Baker.

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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