

## Book Review

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Sergej Flere and Rudi Klanjšek, *The rise and fall of socialist Yugoslavia. Elite nationalism and the collapse of a federation.*

Lanham, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 334 pp.

ISBN 9781498541961

'Why another book on Yugoslavia?', the authors rightly ask. Plenty of books on the topic have been published since 1991, and even more were published after 1948. On the other hand, while in recent years there has been an upsurge of books on the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has not been any equivalent appearance of books on the end of Yugoslavia. This simple fact should lead to some reflection. Yugoslavia is no longer on the mind of European politicians, let alone potential readers.

This is a highly promising book. The first author (Flere) is a well-established sociologist, with special reference to the sociology of religion (a topic which was impossible to avoid in the Yugoslav context). The second author (Klanjšek) is a promising young sociologist. The division of labour between the two is not specified, but in most cases Flere's scholarly and professional experience (which included briefly working as a 'junior political associate' at the League of Communists of Yugoslavia at the end of the 1960s) is likely to have prevailed.

The book is packed with interesting facts and anecdotes, which in themselves make it worth reading. It also strives to provide a



Guido Franzinetti, 'Book Review: Sergej Flere and Rudi Klanjšek, *The rise and fall of socialist Yugoslavia. Elite nationalism and the collapse of a federation*', in: *Studies on National Movements* 8 (2021)

comprehensive overview of research on the dissolution of the second Yugoslavia, but in so doing it stretches itself too thinly. Many of the usual authors are mentioned and discussed, but quite a few are not. Furthermore, many authors are discussed in a cursory and imprecise manner. If one really needs to refer to Zbigniew Brzezinski's views on totalitarianism, one should at least check what he was saying in the 1960s, and not only in the 1950s. All too much space is devoted to punctilious critiques (often justified) and not enough to making a positive argument.

As befits a book written by an author of Flere's generation, the first two chapters, covering the creation of Socialist Yugoslavia, are the most rewarding. They offer a detailed description of the state-building process, with a degree of attentiveness which is often lacking in many accounts of this period. The third chapter addresses the contentious issue of 'Was 'Tito's' Yugoslavia Totalitarian?'. Predictably, this remains a highly controversial one in political and scholarly debates in the ex-Yugoslav republics. The authors give a negative answer to the question, and they have been frequently attacked for this reason. But to an outsider this appear an incredibly provincial debate. In the West, from the 1960s onwards (and perhaps even earlier) nobody seriously considered Tito's Yugoslavia 'totalitarian'. But, for that matter, at the time few would have considered Poland or Hungary 'totalitarian'. Nor would the Soviet Union have been seen as 'totalitarian'. Even the neo-conservative revival in the USA of such a notion proved to be a relatively short-lived affair.

Undoubtedly, the Yugoslav system was a Communist dictatorship. The real historical issue is not whether this dictatorship required a 'totalitarian' label but, rather, how did Yugoslav citizens perceive it at the time, and, even more importantly, how do they perceive it now, in retrospect? For example, how did the son of a Chetnik father perceive the system? The results of the first free elections in 'post-communist' ex-

Yugoslav republics give the impression that many voters did not hold 'Tito's Yugoslavia' in such high esteem. These disillusioned Yugoslavs may even have been a minority at the time, but they were sufficient to condition political developments after 1990.

The subsequent two chapters focus on the 1970s and 1980s, the last two decades of the Yugoslav Socialist system. When it comes to factual matters, the book is always rewarding, and deserves attentive reading, regardless of whether one always shares the authors' point of view. They essentially provide a description of what has been termed the process of 'republicanisation' of the elites of the Yugoslav republics. The crucial role of this process in leading to the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic (SFRY) should be undisputable.

The last three chapters are devoted to a description of the actual process of dissolution, to its theoretical explanation and to its relevance for the outside world. These chapters are less satisfactory, at least from a historian's point of view. The theoretical analysis is overambitious in trying to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the theoretical debates on the Yugoslav dissolution (as if these had not already been surveyed in other studies). A more circumscribed approach would have been more productive from any point of view.

In itself, the view of the collapse of the SFRY as inevitable is nowadays relatively uncontroversial. What remain controversial are the reasons for such a collapse. The authors rightly emphasize the crucial role played by the republican elites. But they also attach great importance to the role of 'nationalism', as if such a term provided a real explanation. One of the great achievements of Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism was its ability to properly historicize nationalism in European history, allowing it to be analysed without being demonized. Unfortunately, the authors prefer to banalize Gellner's theory, and stick to a very hazy (and perhaps traditional) view of nationalism.

Coming to the role of Western Europe in the final Yugoslav crisis, the authors seem to have rather unrealistic expectations of what the Europeans could have done to prevent it. The fact is that the key governments of the European Community (and later European Union) were not in the least willing to play an active role in saving the SFRY. The issue was not primarily that of the possibly premature recognition of Slovene and Croat independence which the German Federal Republic pushed for. The key players were the only states which had (and have) credible military force, Great Britain and France. Their action (and inaction) was the decisive factor. As David Owen pointed out in *Balkan Odyssey* (1995), when the Netherlands (on 13 July 1991) made a proposal for an international conference to promote 'a voluntary redrawing of internal borders between the Yugoslav republics', this obtained precisely zero votes, and the key abstainers were Great Britain and France. In short, 'Europe' (rather than the German-Austrian-Vatican Axis) was simply not willing to put any real effort in preventing the Yugoslav dissolution.

In conclusion, this remains a stimulating book, but it is by no means a reliable summing-up of the debates on the end of Yugoslavia.

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