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Dina Iordanova

Balkans Revisited


Christopher Merrill. The Old Bridge: The Third Balkan War and the Age of the Refugee. Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1995. 95 pp. $6.95, paper.


Fred A. Reed. Salonica Terminus: Journeys Into the Balkan Nightmare. Burnaby, BC: Talonbooks, 1996. 270 pp. $15.95, paper.


Most of the new books on the Balkans include maps of the region: some feature maps of the distribution of ethnic minorities, others—of various peace plan proposals. Many of the books also feature sections with photographs offering variations of the familiar image inventory: displaced refugee families, injured
children, burned homes... Maps and photographs do not tell the whole story, however. The story of the troubled Balkans is being gradually told by a number of authors—travelers and scholars—who have recently revisited the region.

**Books by Travelers**
The travelogues analyzed in Maria Todorova’s recent academic treatise *Imagining the Balkans*⁴ are mostly from the past. Her influential study points to the need of carefully reading the works of the travelogue genre which have shaped the image of the Balkans for centuries—and still do. The very fact that *Balkan Ghosts*, the much criticized book by Robert Kaplan,² is still a best-seller, is indicative that the travelogue approach to the Balkans is alive and well. Recently many more Westerners have traveled to the Balkan countries and then written and published accounts of their travels. As the motives that led them to the Balkans, and the sites that they visited were different, so were the levels of their understanding of the lands they traveled through.

Randall Baker’s *Summer in the Balkans*, for example, is a non pretentious diary sharing experiences of the 1992 summer that he, a global public administration expert, spent on a Fulbright grant in Bulgaria, during which he traveled to the former Yugoslav lands as well. That summer he came to realize that the Balkan countries are quite different from each other, “even though we tend to lump them together as the ‘Balkans’” (p. 6). Baker does not venture deeply into the historical background but rather portrays the people he worked with or the problems these people coped with in trying to overcome the legacy of communist bureaucracy. His book is a sincere recognition of the endeavors that people facing the challenges of difficult times undertake in building the social foundations of democracy.

*Shattered Eagles* by T.J. Winnifrith is another travel diary—a collection of fragments introducing the reader to the minorities of various Balkan countries, mostly Vlachs who were the subject of an earlier book of his.³ This time Winnifrith has set out to document the existence of the scattered Vlah diaspora, a subject on which he claims an indisputable expertise and a cause which he has embraced passionately. His reports on the Pomaks of Bulgaria and the Karakatchans of Greece, however, are nothing but fragmentary, based only on

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travel notes from short visits and unsupported by adequate research. Thus the
general impression of Shattered Eagles is one of journalism disguised as
academic writing.

Fred Reed's Salonica Terminus, on the contrary, does not claim academic
status but offers much more in terms of well researched historical and
ethnographic background and systematic information on present-day political and
economic realities. Reed's focus is the Southern Balkans, mostly Northern
Greece, Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo. Whereas his expertise is obviously in
Greek matters, he pays attention to the other lands in the region as well. In spite
of occasionally being unduly harsh in his criticism (e.g., pp. 140 and 174)—and
sometimes his opinions are quite controversial (pp. 229–231)—his
impressionistic style encompasses large research material and provides an
excellent introduction for the reader to the Balkan microcosm of ethnic diversity
and delicate harmony.

Another travelogue sub-category includes the numerous books by
journalists whose travel to the Balkans was triggered by the war in Bosnia. One
of many is Christopher Merrill's The Old Bridge, which deals chiefly with
nationalist tensions running high in the divided city of Mostar, but also includes
accounts of the author's visits to various other corners of ex-Yugoslavia. Merrill
also critically discusses the humanitarian aid efforts and UNHCR's activities, a
topic which is present in most of the other books of this same type. Merrill's
book is representative of the category—a compassionate piece of writing by an
author who believes that recording and articulating the troubles of the region can
change the ways the things evolve in the years to come.

Others chose to travel to Serbia, as did Florence Levinson. In 1993 this
Chicago-based freelancer spent some time in Belgrade and conducted interviews
with a series of Serbian intellectuals and politicians. The result is her bulky
Belgrade, an attempt to restore the internationally damaged image of the Serbs
who were globally demonized by the mainstream media. Levinson presents
herself as an objective consciousness laying out evidence that allows the reader
to determine if indeed everything is to be blamed on the Serbs. She fulfills her
task by diligently reporting her numerous interviews with members of various
social and political circles in Belgrade. Yet, she is somewhat too critical of the

4 Some other recent books of this group are: Barbara Demick, Logavina Street: 
Life and Death in a Sarajevo Neighborhood (Kansas City: Andrews & McMeel, 1996); 
bis 26. November 1994 (Heidelberg: Heidelberger Verlagsanstalt, 1995); Peter 
Maass, Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War (New York: Knopf, 1996); David Rieff, 
Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West (New York: Simon and Schuster, 
1995).
liberal-minded ones (such as independent magazine *Vreme’s* Petar Lukovic), and too agreeable in relating the accounts of her encounters with some moderately conservative politicians. One is left to wonder what was Levinson’s genuine motive in writing this book, after she initially confesses her unfamiliarity with the intricate politics of the region.

The motives for a trip aimed at repairing the damage done to the image of the Serbs are explicitly stated in a more recent book by the influential Austrian Peter Handke—*A Journey to the Rivers*. He traveled to Serbia along with two Serbian friends and in spite of being conscious that his trip may seem somewhat “comparable to the glorifications of the Soviet system by some travelers in the West during the thirties” (p. 24) he ventures on, firmly determined to overcome the “mutual inflexible images.” No doubt in Serbia there are people worth meeting. Milorad Pavić, the writer, for example, and it is with him and people like him that Handke meets. In relating his conversations with these intellectuals and in telling of his meetings with ordinary people, Handke describes how Serbia has been devastated by the war, not only economically, but morally, and how unhappy people there are. Nevertheless, Handke’s essay rightly belongs with the other examples of Balkan travelogue literature. He differs in that he traveled to Serbia, whereas other Western literary figures, like Juan Goytisolo, Susan Sontag, or Bernard-Henry Levi chose to go to Sarajevo and write of the moral ordeal and the unhappiness of people there. However, it is only Michael Ignatieff (who was among the first to venture into his own travelogue exploration of the region) who came to question the deeper motives behind all this traveling, and bitterly noted that it was triggered by the inherited need of Western intellectuals to “not only save others but to save ourselves, or rather an image of ourselves as defenders of universal decencies.”

**BOOKS BY SCHOLARS**

Miron Rezun, a political science professor at the University of New Brunswick, opens his book on Yugoslavia with the statement that “Nemesis in the Balkan context springs from tribalism: There are tribal forms of psychology and lingering tribal social relationships in the Balkan region. A tribalistic mentality

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will often cause an ethnic group or a nation to view the world in manichean terms, as a struggle between good and evil, with its particular interests purporting to be good" (p. x). Subscribing to this version of the primordial argument, Rezun does not really confess it entirely and explores a complex of historical and political factors for the war. His sources, albeit scholarly, are generally outdated. The research is based mostly on writings from the 1970s and 1980s; only a few references are from the 1990s and those are mostly media reports. This by itself is telling—many of the hurried generalizations found in Rezun’s text were contained in these earlier academic studies. The author has set out to dissect critically many commonly shared misperceptions of the Balkans and takes aim at superficial journalistic work, but in the course of the work he himself uncritically repeats many clichés (e.g. “The entire history of Yugoslavia has been marked by conflict, disunity, and hate” [p. 23]). The book does not fulfill the promise it makes—to look at the European context of the Balkan tensions, and the European backdrop in his study is a rather scattered one.

In the promotional flyer for Rezun’s book praise is extended by Sabrina Petra Ramet. Her own research on former Yugoslavia, however, is much superior. Her Balkan Babel has undergone two editions; Ramet has also edited more recently a volume of writings which covers various aspects of the current crisis in ex-Yugoslavia, a wide spectrum of issues from historiography to cinema and feminism. 8 In Balkan Babel Ramet does not explore the historical background of various “legacies” but focuses directly on the deepening political crisis in Yugoslavia since Tito’s death. In the opening sections she deals with the political debate of 1980-1986, with the decay of the one-party system and changes in the communist party, with the crisis of self-government, and with various other elements pushing the disintegration. She further considers more sources of discord, some of which are the mobilization of Slovenia, the policies of Milošević in Kosovo, and the political fragmentation. If she had continued this line of narrative, she would have come to discuss various aspects of the war that followed. However, leaving this discussion for the concluding part of the book, she turns to the important background issues of culture and civil society, a consideration which makes up the most original part of the book. These very chapters, however, are the weakest. The chapter devoted to exploring the media, for example, offers interesting data but is inconclusive as Ramet is apparently unfamiliar with the specific approaches scholars of media take to their subject. 9

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9 I should underline here that for now there has not been a completely satisfying study of the media situation in former Yugoslavia, in spite that some books explored
The chapter on the role of Yugoslav rock music touches on important aspects of public life but does not explore the more recent and much more relevant pandemia of nationalistic turbo-folk. Chapter six, dealing with “women and men” raises issues that in themselves are a topic for a whole separate book. While it is praiseworthy that Ramet is sensitive to the cultural and political aspects of gender inequalities in the Balkans, it is disheartening that she fails to offer much of substance. Her thoughts on the particularities of gender roles raise more questions than are answered, while her entire “gender” argumentation caters directly to the primordial argument, especially in her interpretation of the “machismo” linkages of “Serbian pastoralism” with the “male complex” or of “phallocracy and war.” Ramet’s further exploration of role of the various religions in former Yugoslavia represent a continuation of her earlier work on the issue and particularly interesting here is her analysis of the relationships between church and state. It is especially noteworthy that Ramet is convinced of the importance of such phenomena as independent publications, or media in the ethnic peripheries, or works of literature, theater and film and that—unlike other authors who most often leave these out—she discusses their decisive shaping influence over state policies and commonly shared beliefs.

A different approach to the Yugoslav crisis is taken by John Lampe, for whom the history of Yugoslavia is the key to understanding its present day problems. On the opening page of his ambitious project he promises “to examine the bloody demise of the former Yugoslavia in the full light of its

these issues in detail. See for example Mark Thompson, Forging War: Media in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Hercegovina (London: Article 19, 1994); James Gow, Richard Paterson and Alison Preston, eds., Bosnia by Television (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).


11 This type of primordialist reasoning, however, is brought to the extreme in the book of Stjepan Mjestrovic Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and the Fall of Communism (College Station, TX: Texas A & M Press, 1993).

12 Similar issues are explored in the Routledge volume edited by Scott Davis, Religion and Justice in the War over Bosnia (New York: Routledge, 1996).
history and that of its ethnic mosaic." In his comprehensive account of Yugoslavia's history beginning from the 800s, Lampe chooses to direct his attention more "on how these people mixed and migrated across proximate lands, and where they intersected with one another—politically, economically, or socially—before and during their unification twice in this century" (p. 6). What is more, Lampe's historical narrative covers not only the different ethnic groups, but also the various population layers (peasants, intelligentsia, industrial workers), thus recreating the whole complex fabric of Yugoslav life.

In general, Lampe avoids speculation and discusses (or disputes) established opinion on the subject matter. He is understandably cautious, and yet it is a pity that his narrative of Yugoslavia's history ends with the 1991 elections, and only touches on the beginning of the war in Bosnia. Thus he avoids entering the realm of difficult speculation and abstains from providing the answers one expects from such an all-encompassing scholarly study. No explanation of "the bloody demise" is to be found in the book, nor are the abundant historical facts in the text linked causally to the demise itself.\textsuperscript{13}

Yet it is precisely the question of causes that is central. Some difficult answers are offered by the authors of Yugoslavia's Ethnic Nightmare, mostly journalists and scholars from former Yugoslavia. They explore the complexity of causes they believe led to the violent conflict they describe as "the most catastrophic event in Europe since the Holocaust" (p. 3). The collection, edited by Jasminka Uдовiцki and James Ridgeway, is an intelligent work of insiders and although it does not answer all the questions it claims to, it is worth investigation. The authors distance themselves from the "primordialists," preferring to offer a complex exploration of economical, political, and cultural factors, and in particular of the degeneration of the public discourse.\textsuperscript{14} They also focus on the functioning of the media and on the voices of the opposition, offering insights that help in understanding the processes at work in Yugoslavia.

This same quality of intelligent insider's work can be found in Mihailo Crnobrnja's The Yugoslav Drama. The author is a former Yugoslav ambassador to the European Community who now teaches political science in Montreal and Ottawa. The book is well written, and gains from the author's self-confessed difficulties in distancing himself from his past in his evaluation. This study casts light on mechanisms that developed long before the crisis became explicit.

\textsuperscript{13} But this can barely be a claim to Lampe's text only, as linking of cause and effect in history is a logical operation seriously disputed by many positivist philosophers.

\textsuperscript{14} A very interesting criticism of the "primordial" argument is offered also by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in his Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
In a concise historical overview, Crnobrnja admits that from its very beginning the structure of the country was not very sound. The diversity of cultures was not properly accommodated, and it was erected in 1918 on a cracked foundation (p. 63). Crnobrnja explores the roots of the new nationalism that developed as communists converted into nationalists and he highlights important details such as the atmosphere in the years immediately following Tito's death, as well as the Kosovo tensions of the mid-1980s. In a chapter devoted to "the supporting cast" he vividly discusses the roles of the intelligentsia, the media, the army, and foreign diplomats.

However, when it comes to analyzing the time of the crisis (when the author no longer enjoyed the privileged position of an insider but was rather an exiled observer), Crnobrnja's analysis is no longer as original and competent as the one offered in the first half of the book. He repeats uncritically Western media clichés (e.g. calling the Russians "traditional allies of the Serbs," p. 186); does not go very deep into critically analyzing the controversial Western involvement; and sounds somewhat too optimistic when discussing the Dayton Accord. The Yugoslav Drama convincingly demonstrates that an insider's knowledge of the background does not necessarily lead to insights into later political developments.

Lenard Cohen's Broken Bonds, which deals with the same issues and covers approximately the same time period as Crnobrnja's book, is a serious study from the beginning to the very end of its analysis: it is carried out in an objective and systematic manner. In an overview of the evolution of the Yugoslav idea he explores the latent tensions and misunderstandings hidden in the early stages of the union, and continues as he explores the wars of the twentieth century. The failure and the rebirth of the ideal of unity is at the center of his attention. He balances the allegations that Yugoslavism has always been a vehicle for Serbian political hegemony with a detailed investigation of socialist reforms and the post-Tito crisis. The bulk of the book is devoted to a detailed and well crafted political analysis of the intricate peregrinations in Yugoslav politics during the past decade. Besides dealing with the Croatian and Bosnian situation, Cohen gives a remarkable discussion of the situation in Macedonia and evaluates potential conflicts there (most of the other authors touch on the Macedonia and Kosovo, but do not venture into analysis and evaluation). In the concluding chapter, Cohen discusses the new elites and the new status of the delegitimated federation, as well as new trends in public opinion and the collapse of constitutional authority. Broken Bonds is a serious and competent study throughout.

A French political scientist, Catherine Samary, provides another competent analysis, and the translation of her book Yugoslavia Dismembered into English
is fully justified (but it does not seem this work has received the distribution which it deserves). Her concise narrative addresses in a direct and intelligent way most of the key questions of the explosive Balkan situation. Samary never forgets to bring into the discussion the international prospective—unlike other authors who do not deliver on this promise. She does not advocate one group over another, and if at times she seems to be too harsh to the Croatians (which immediately leads the reader into suspecting an underlying pro-Serbian bias), the next moment she blasts the Serbs. Samary follows a topical rather than a chronological approach, and discusses such issues as evolving national identities as an expression of political choices; the rationalization of difference; the relationship between citizenship and nationality. She paints a critical portrait of the Titoist regime, demonstrating how the effects of the free market ideology of the 1980s exacerbated the overall crisis of "Titoism." She analyses "the wars within the war" from the point of view of a Serb, a Croat and a Slovene, and then offers her own interpretation. She believes that blame for the conflict must be shared, though unequally, and argues her case carefully. Samary does not hesitate to address the responsibility of the international community for the Yugoslav conflict and insists that despite conflicting interests in the economy or warfare and the different spheres of diplomatic interests, all the Western powers have shared an approach based on pragmatic, evolving—and disastrous—Realpolitik. Samary proposes that the stakes in the Yugoslav crisis are important not only for the peoples of ex-Yugoslavia, but for Europe and the future of the world. With concision she manages to consider most of her subject’s important factors and to display a very realistic judgment.

Over the past year I have read most of the texts written recently on former Yugoslavia and the Balkans. 15 Although the war seems to be (hopefully) over, the Balkans are an area worth revisiting and will still be attracting the attention of writers and scholars alike for some time to come.

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Canadian Slavonic Papers is the official organ of the Canadian Association of Slavists. It is published in March, June, September and December and is sent to all members of the Association. Membership in the Association is open to all those professionally engaged in the field upon payment of the annual membership fee of $40. Special rates are available for professors emeriti and students. Single issues and back numbers can be ordered at $10 each. A cumulative Index (1974–1988) is available at $10 a copy.

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Selected articles appearing in Canadian Slavonic Papers are abstracted or listed in American Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies, Historical Abstracts, Linguistic Bibliography/Bibliographie Linguistique, MLA International Bibliography, Canadian Index/CBCA, Public Affairs Information Bulletin, and Sociological Abstracts.

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Composition by Canadian Slavonic Papers, University of Alberta.
Printed by ART DESIGN PRINTING INC., Edmonton, AB, December 1997.

CN ISSN 0008-5006

This publication has been made possible in part by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.