

Publications

The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s

by V.P. Gagnon Jr.

I first went to Yugoslavia in October, 1980, five months after Tito's death. Traveling south from Germany, where I'd been working, I visited a friend outside of Ljubljana and another friend in Zagreb. I also accompanied the students of the Economics Faculty of the University of Zagreb on their school trip to Belgrade, where we laid a wreath on Tito's grave. I returned to Yugoslavia the following year and visited Belgrade, Zagreb, Skopje, Sarajevo, and Ljubljana.

Yugoslavia struck me as a fascinating place. "YU-rock," the excellent rock and punk music performed in Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian and popular in all parts of the country, seemed exotically cool. I was also taken by the wry humor of the people I met, including young communists, and their cynical view of the ruling communist party, self-defense forces, and the slogan "brotherhood and unity." Yet this was a cynicism tinged by idealism, and many people seemed at some important level to still believe in the ideals of the Yugoslav experiment.

When I returned home, I read more about Yugoslav history and politics. What I discovered, combined with my experiences, led me to pursue the study of this intriguing place. I learned Serbo-Croatian and wrote a doctoral dissertation that looked in-depth at Yugoslav domestic and foreign policies in the 1960s. Just as I was finishing the dissertation, war broke out.

When in the early 1990s I revisited what had been Yugoslavia, I returned to a place that had changed in fundamental ways. Deranged men marched menacingly through downtown Zagreb sporting fascist insignia; kiosks and stands sold ustaša relics; foreigners were treated with great suspicion. Not too far away, an uneasy truce was being enforced by the Croatian army and the armed forces of the secessionist "Krajina Republic," while entire villages had been razed to the ground, their populations killed or expelled. In Sarajevo — where eleven years earlier I'd gone to nightclubs, drunk beer, eaten burek and cevapi, and admired the Ottoman-era architecture — the city was now besieged by extremist forces shelling the town from the surrounding hills. In the rest of Bosnia paramilitary forces from Serbia were undertaking what came to be known as "ethnic cleansing." What had happened in those eleven years?

In the West there was no shortage of explanations. Journalists had just discovered the Balkans painted images of primitive Yugoslavs nursing ancient ethnic hatreds, who were suddenly free to act out their fantasies of bloodlust. Neoprimalist scholars focused on the historical and cultural inevitability of the wars, and on leaders mobilizing the ethnic masses into violent conflict. More rational-choice-oriented academics echoed the arguments of the ethnic cleansers by explaining the violence in terms of conflict between clearly defined "ethnic groups" whose desire for security perversely brought them insecurity.

What was most striking to me at the time was that these views of the wars did not fit in with my understandings of those places, based on personal experiences. Although my direct experiences had

been limited to urban areas, these views also did not reflect what I had learned in my academic work on Yugoslav society as a whole. Indeed, the more closely I looked at the data on the state of Yugoslav society before the war, the more puzzling the outbreak and the intensity of the violence became. Also problematic, in this light, were the explanations that had been advanced in the West. As my book, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*, demonstrates, indicators on the ground, within specific communities, showed no sign of inevitable violence. Nor did the academic literature on ethnic conflict adequately describe what had occurred — especially the literature that focused on the overwhelming power of ethnic identity to mobilize people to violence. What I found were approaches and explanations that did not fit in with the society, culture, or history I had come to know, nor with the information and reports about the violence that came from the region itself.

My book is an attempt to understand the wars in Yugoslavia in a way that takes into account the social reality of identities and culture, but that also sees them in the broader contexts of everyday life and of the structures of power within which that takes place. My book is not meant to be an exhaustive history of the wars, nor is it an ethnography of everyday life before, during, or after the wars. Rather, it is an attempt to tell the story of the wars in a way that does justice to social realities and that recognizes the agency of human beings, while acknowledging the importance of larger structures of power in constraining individuals' choices and perceptions of choice, and in shaping outcomes.

I show that the violence of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s was part of a broad strategy in which images of threatening enemies and violence were used by conservative elites in Serbia and Croatia: not in order to mobilize people, but rather as a way to demobilize those who were pushing for changes in the structures of economic and political power that would negatively affect the values and interests of those elites. The goal of this strategy was to silence, marginalize, and demobilize challengers and their supporters in order to create political homogeneity at home. This in turn enabled conservatives to maintain control of existing structures of power as well as to reposition themselves by converting state-owned property into privately held wealth, the basis of power in a new system of a liberal economy.

The wars and violence seen in the 1990s were thus not the expression of grassroots sentiment in the sites of conflict. They were also far from being the democratic expression of the political and cultural preferences of the wider population. Rather, the violence was imposed on plural communities from outside of those communities by political and military forces from Serbia and Croatia as part of a broader strategy of demobilization.

In making this argument, I also need to point out a few caveats. I am not arguing that ethnicity was meaningless. I am not arguing that Yugoslavia was a paradise of multicultural coexistence. I am not arguing that history is irrelevant.

Approaches to ethnic conflict often portray it as an all or nothing proposition: that is, either ethnicity in and of itself is the cause of violence, or else ethnicity is a construction that has no real meaning. The approach in this book recognizes ethnic identification as a social fact. That is, many people in the former Yugoslavia did identify as Serbs, Croats, or Muslims. But the meaning of that identity was contextual: it was not homogeneous, nor was it unchanging. Along these lines, sociologist Martijn van Beek describes

the tendency of observers of conflicts that are framed and described as ethnic to focus on that ethnicity in their explanations.[1] He labels this tendency “identity fetishism,” or a fixation on “the imputed stability and irreducibility of identity and the groupness it supposedly reflects.” Such a focus, van Beek argues, “leads to a ‘misrecognition’ of social identification, obscures the processes and conditions that give rise to conflict, and reproduces the logic of discrimination that it seeks to resolve.” These fallacies are exactly what this study is attempting to avoid. As van Beek and others suggest, it is much more useful to conceptualize identity as a process of identification rather than as a static attribute. In fact, the Yugoslav cases show quite well how conceptualizing identification as a process, rather than identity as an attribute or thing that people “have,” helps us understand much better the interaction between categories of culture and politics.

So while the story I am telling does focus on the goals and strategies of elites, it is not a story of pure and simple manipulation, of leaders “playing the ethnic card” or pushing buttons and getting Pavlovian responses from the ethnic masses. Indeed, elites are forced to resort to violence to accomplish their goals precisely because it is not easy to translate ethnic identification into mobilization or violence, given the social realities reflected in processes of ethnic identification. It is the very inability of elites to “play the ethnic card” as a means of mobilizing the population that leads them to use other options, most notably the creation of violent conflict as a strategy of political demobilization.

Historical awareness of the participants is also relevant, in part because of the selective ways in which participants in and observers of conflict draw on history to “prove” the correctness of their positions or the inevitability of particular outcomes. Yet stories that focus history or historical memories as determining current outcomes miss the point that within each republic both proponents and opponents of the wars drew on the same history in selective ways in order to make their points. Even among those who invoked “nationalist ideologies,” there existed differing views of proper goals, of the best way to achieve those goals, and of the lessons to be drawn from history. Indeed, history is one of the main fields in which current politics is contested. Every group has collective memories of injustices and grievances. The relevant question is what meaning is attributed to those memories; which memories are foregrounded and which are ignored or minimized; when do memories become instrumentalized in order to justify violence; who undertakes such instrumentalization, and to what purpose?

If we can learn anything from Balkan history, it is that ethnic identities and the meanings attributed to them are fluid. This is a region where coexistence was the norm, where homogeneity has historically not been a prerequisite for peace, and where violence was most often a tool used by outsiders in order to deal with social and/or political realities that they did not like and could not otherwise control. Indeed, in other work I have shown that the dynamics of the wars of the 1990s in many ways are a replay of earlier conflicts that are often cited as “proof” of the existence of ancient ethnic hatreds and the overwhelming power of ethnic identity.[2] Yet looking at it from a social constructivist perspective, what becomes clear is that in those cases too the goals and strategies of elites were of vital importance in determining outcomes. Existing identities, and the meanings of those identities, were in these cases obstacles to elite goals rather than the means by which elites achieved their goals. In response, elites fomented and provoked conflict in ethnic terms in order to change the meanings of ethnic identities and the nature of ethnic groupness, that is, the nature of the relationships among people who identify in

common ethnic terms. Violence was thus used to force a change in how people identified and what it meant to identify in particular ways. So rather than being determinative, historical events set the parameter of choices facing various actors, while historical discourse seeks to justify and rationalize current actions.

The discourse of ethnicity, for example, is the result of historical factors related to the institutional framework of the Ottoman Empire, the development of nationally defined states in Western Europe, the approach to the “national question” of the Communist International, and the decision to institute the “ethnic key” in Tito’s Yugoslavia. But while these factors may constrain possible choices, none of them determines outcomes, despite the ways in which historical experiences are invoked by political actors.

Of course, at the other extreme is the similarly simplistic view of history, say, of Bosnia as a kind of “multicultural paradise.” This view is also not much more than a projection of a Western fantasy about itself. The important question is not whether a society has conflicts—historical and current race relations in the United States are arguably in a worse state than Croat-Serb relations in Croatia before the war—but rather how conflicts are handled. Every society has coping mechanisms, institutions, rituals, or other social forms that serve to channel conflict in ways that ensure basic societal stability at the local level. The violence that we have seen in the Balkans did not come out of these organic coping mechanisms: it was not the result of the social situation “on the ground.” Rather, the violence consistently came from outside those communities that became the sites of violence.

At the macro level, just as throughout both Eastern and Western Europe, so too Yugoslavia was inevitably facing some major restructuring in response to pressures for political and economic liberalization. But in many ways it was better placed than other east European states to undergo those changes. While it is doubtful that Tito’s Yugoslavia would emerge intact from the transition process, it is also far from inevitable that it would lead to the violent war we actually did see. Other options were put forward by elites, and those other options tended to be the most supported among the wider population. Yet violence and warfare, the least favored option, came to dominate. An explanation for this cannot be found in the culture of the region or the state of society in the communities that became the sites of violence.

My work seeks to problematize not just the primordialist or essentialist views of the Yugoslav conflict that view it as the result of ethnic passions, but also to question the implicit assumptions of many works that claim to be constructivist but that nevertheless use an essentialized understanding of “ethnic groups” as political actors. I show that elites, because of their control over resources (including economic, military, political, and informational), are able to use violence to try to create a particular notion of groupness that did not exist before; that is, the violence seeks to change what it means to identify as Serb or Croat and to impose an equivalence between ethnic identity and political position—in other words, a political homogeneity. The strategy of violence and demobilization is necessary precisely because ethnic identities are not the powerful motivating forces that neoprimalist and essentialists assume they are. Simply appealing to those identities, therefore, cannot automatically induce (or prevent) specific political behavior.

The term “demobilization” as used in my book refers to a process by which people who had previously been politically mobilized, or who were in the process of being mobilized, become silenced, marginalized, and excluded from the public realm. For example, in Serbia and Croatia, just as in the rest of Eastern Europe, people were mobilizing against the existing structures of power. But unlike in Czechoslovakia or East Germany, where the mobilizations succeeded in changing not only the ruling elites but also the very nature of the political and economic systems, in Serbia and Croatia the regime managed to use a strategy of violence to demobilize those people, to silence their voices and the voices of challenger elites, to marginalize them and the issues they were using to challenge the status quo, and to portray them and their concerns as outside the realm of legitimate political discourse. Demobilization is thus a strategy whose effectiveness is due not to its appeals to ethnicity or identity, but rather to the willingness of its purveyors to use violence and coercion in order to silence people.

Much of this comes as no news to scholars who work in the constructivist paradigm, and there are works on Yugoslavia that take that approach. But unfortunately this approach is very far from representing the “conventional wisdom,” especially among political scientists and scholars of international relations, a point I elaborate in the appendix of my book. The challenge for political scientists, in particular, is to take what is common knowledge among many sociologists and anthropologists and apply it seriously to their work. My book is an attempt to do just that.

The focus of this work involves two cases — Serbia and Croatia. These two cases are interesting and important, because they represent cases of what western observers characterize as extremist nationalism leading to violence, and they are often held up as the paradigmatic examples of ethnic conflict. Within these cases there is also variation over time in terms of the political strategies used by elites and in terms of which parts of the elite were dominant. By tracing the development of elite strategies over time, the challenges to elite interests, and the discourse of threat and the strategy of conflict, this work seeks to demonstrate that the strategies of conflict had as their goal a political demobilizing of the wider population as a way of preserving control over the structures of power.

Finally, how we think about the causes of ethnic conflict is not just a matter of observation or analysis from a distance, but has direct feedback into the lives of people in the region. In this calculus, scholars are far from being merely neutral analysts, but are integral parts of how these kinds of wars, and this set of wars, in particular, have been and are being constructed in the minds not only of their students and academic colleagues, but also policy makers and the general public. The West’s involvement in the crisis and its aftermath meant that the way Western decision makers thought about the conflict has had a tremendous impact on the policies Western states pursued in the region. Exactly because its understanding of the causes and effects of the violence were derived from assumptions and concepts described above, the West’s policies in the region have been very often counterproductive. While it is clear that local actors are the ones who made the choices to pursue policies of massive violence against civilian populations, their choices were structured and facilitated by decisions of Western policy makers. By providing the intellectual justification for seeing these conflicts as the result of irrational passions or of politicians mobilizing populations by appealing to hatreds, scholars bear at least part of the responsibility for the negative consequences of Western policy in the region. My book provides a

framework that addresses the above-described puzzles, while recognizing the responsibility and complicity of academics in questions of power.

Notes

1 Martijn van Beek, "Beyond Identity Fetishism: 'Communal' Conflict in Ladakh and the Limits of Autonomy," *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 4 (2002): 528–529

2 V. P. Gagnon Jr., "Historical Roots of the Yugoslav Conflict," in *International Organizations and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Milton Esman and Shibley Telhami (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 179–197