

Resolving the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative

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You have your facts. We have our facts. You have a complete right to choose between the two versions.

Simo Drljača, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) indictee

This special edition of *Nationalities Papers* is dedicated to the research and analysis of a number of scholars whose work continues to illuminate issues related to the disintegration of Yugoslavia at the end of the twentieth century. All of them are participants in an international consortium of historians and social scientists which has worked diligently during the past four years to investigate 11 themes or critical controversies surrounding the tragic events in Yugoslavia. Today, the consortium, known as the "Scholars' Initiative," has grown to over 250 participants from 27 countries, with well over half coming from all eight entities of the former Yugoslavia. Working together in careful research, discussion, and critical peer review of one another's written analysis, the members of the Initiative are reaching the stage of the project where they can begin to share some of their work. This collection is the first of two commissioned volumes of individual studies. The project will conclude with the publication in 2006 of a composite volume comprising the final analyses of the Initiative's 11 research teams.

Amid all of the bitter debates about the Yugoslav conflicts, few would deny the pivotal role that history has played in shaping people's minds in the region. Understandably, but unfortunately, each national group has tended to employ its own array of facts, many of which are either distorted or blatantly untrue. These divergent recitations of history have helped sow mistrust, resentment, and hatred among peoples who coexisted with one another for long periods of time.

In the nine years since the peace negotiations in Dayton, Ohio, the international community has endeavored in various ways to help the peoples of the former Yugoslavia move beyond the tragedy. Western media platforms such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and the BBC have disseminated news and information; while philanthropic NGOs like the Soros, Friedrich-Naumann, and Bertelsmann Foundations have sponsored numerous confidence-building "people-to-people" programs. The Hague Tribunal (ICTY) has painstakingly investigated and then exposed criminal acts committed by all sides in the conflict. Nevertheless, it has remained very difficult to overcome the misrepresentations of history by "patriotic" political leaders and by the great majority of the mainstream media platforms that support

their views. This has certainly been the case in Serbia, whose leaders and free media continue to minimize, ignore, or even flatly deny the criminal record of the Milošević regime. But it has also been a serious problem for Bosniaks, Croats, and Kosovar Albanians whose sense of victimhood has mortgaged their ability to acknowledge legitimate Serb grievances that helped empower populist politicians like Milošević. Moreover, so long as politicians and the media retain a *de facto* monopoly over public memory, perception, and interpretations, they will continue to discredit and marginalize the independent voices that challenge them. Indeed, there exist many among the region's political, academic, and media elite who privately acknowledge the misrepresentations that shape their nations' various accounts of history, but who nonetheless find it difficult to assume a public position on the problem which may subject them to ridicule and question their patriotism.

Ever since the fall of Slobodan Milošević, the Scholars' Initiative has endeavored to study the period 1986–2000 as critically and objectively as possible. It believes that the ongoing research, discussion, and publication of its work will help to bridge the chasm that separates serious historical scholarship from those interpretations that nationalist politicians and media have impressed on their populations. A start-up grant from the U.S. Institute of Peace and supplementary support from several host institutions enabled the Scholars' Initiative to hold annual plenary meetings in each of the last four years,² while a second major grant from the National Endowment for Democracy has funded individual research by project participants from the Yugoslav successor states.

Given gaps in the historical record and the existence of sometimes contradictory evidence, we certainly recognize that we cannot expect to resolve all of the issues under examination. In some instances we may only be able to narrow the parameters within which opposing sides can still engage in reasoned debate. We do, however, aspire to take an important first step toward narrowing the cognitive gap among peoples in the region. With thorough scholarship and by sustained interaction with the media and public officials, we strive to validate evidence and discredit unfounded, proprietary myths. Indeed, such an international consortium can furnish a common and ostensibly legitimate, alternative account on which more moderate leaders can lean for support—if not now, then perhaps at some point in the future.

Admittedly, no discussion of the Yugoslav tragedy can begin without the deeper historical context, especially the record of ethnic interaction over the past two centuries. The project's research teams have, however, focused their study and analyses on 11 key issues or controversies that inform virtually every debate among the peoples of the Yugoslav successor states. These are:

1. Kosovo under Autonomy (1974–1990)
2. The Dissolution of Yugoslavia (1986–1991)
3. Independence and the Fate of Minorities (1991–1992)
4. War Crimes and Genocide (1991–1995)

5. The International Community and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY)/ Belligerents (1991–1995)
6. The Safe Areas (1992–1995)
7. The War in Croatia (1991–1995)
8. Milošević's Kosovo (1998–1999)
9. U.S./NATO Intervention (1998–1999)
10. The Hague Tribunal
11. Living Together or Hating Each Other

The articles in this special edition of *Nationalities Papers* reflect research stemming from seven of these 11 research teams.

Nebojša Vladislavljević challenges the prevailing argument that Kosovo's Serbs were simply manipulated by Belgrade-based intellectuals and Milošević. Using newly available sources, he demonstrates that a number of grassroots groups of Kosovo Serbs played prominent roles in mobilizing their fellow Serbs in Kosovo in a series of actions that date from the early 1980s. While dissident intellectuals and Milošević eventually aided the cause of the Kosovo Serb activists, they were not responsible for "the creation and consolidation" of the local protest networks.

Sabrina P. Ramet offers two articles dedicated to the task of tracking the roots of the violent collapse of Yugoslavia. Each of them reminds us of the complexity of the question of that collapse and of the clear lack of consensus in its analysis. In her first article she considers other scholars' efforts to explain the collapse and their emphasis on particular variables in their analyses. In the end she suggests a working synthesis of approaches that attempts to answer some of the critical questions associated with Yugoslavia's dissolution. Ramet's second article draws upon the work of Anthony F. C. Wallace from almost a half century ago concerning revitalization movements. Ramet argues that understanding the Serb national awakening in the 1980s as just such a revitalization movement will help to explain how "Serb nationalists could construe their initiatives as responses to some perceived threat coming from outside the community of Serbs, the phases in the development of that movement, and its role in impelling socialist Yugoslavia toward breakup and meltdown."

Matjaž Klemenčič and Jernej Zupančič broaden our understanding of the impact of Yugoslavia's dissolution on two of its minority groups, the Hungarians and Italians, with a special emphasis on the status of minority rights for these groups in the post-Yugoslav states. While the literature concerning relations among the main national groups of the former Yugoslavia (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosniaks, *etc.*) is extensive, much less attention has been given to the fate of Yugoslavia's several minorities. The authors demonstrate here that the record of establishing clear protections for these minorities varies dramatically from one state to the other.

Benjamin Rusek and Charles Ingrao consider the most recent evidence in the continuing controversy concerning responsibility for several deadly artillery attacks against civilians during the long siege of Sarajevo. While recognizing that additional

scholarship may provide the absolute proof that confirms or denies their summary conclusions, Rusek and Ingrao are confident that most evidence to date points to Bosnian Serb forces as responsible for these attacks.

Besnik Pula examines the origins of the nonviolent resistance movement in Kosovo in an effort to look more closely at the “parallel state” that Kosovo Albanians created to deal with Serbia’s repressive policies there. He argues that the parallel state was a “largely unplanned-for phenomenon” and takes an approach to his subject that “purposefully breaks with conventional frameworks of ethnic conflict, as developed particularly by international relations scholars.” He breaks important new ground in this analysis, which is historically rooted and gives particular attention to events between 1988 and 1992, a time in which the parallel state began to emerge.

James Gow and Ivan Zveržhanovski assess the performance of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in its trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević. They conclude that at the end of the prosecution case in February 2004, the results were clearly mixed. While the quest for a “judicial measure of truth” has perhaps not been fulfilled, one might argue that the quest for “historical truth” has been advanced by a body of evidence that scholars can now use to compile as an objective account as possible of those “contentious, awful events.”

Finally, Maryanne Yerkes takes us well beyond the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the period of armed conflict to examine the “sensitive process of facing the violent past” in Serbia in the aftermath of the tragedy. From October 2001 until December 2002 Yerkes interviewed young people in Serbia to discern their views on the very concept of “confronting the past” and to see how these youth perceived the various initiatives (local, national, and international) undertaken in Serbia to encourage this process. Yerkes concludes that many challenges remain in this effort to face the past, but she also offers some hope. A better understanding of the factors that affect the youth in their feelings about the process may yield new and more successful initiatives.

NOTES

1. Charles Ingrao is Director of the Scholars’ Initiative; Thomas Emmert is Associate Director
2. Morović, Serbia (September, 2001) Host: University of Novi Sad; Co-organizers: City of Novi Sad, Vojvodina Assembly, Ministry of Education. Sarajevo (July, 2002) Host: United Nations Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina; Co-organizers: Citizens’ Pact for South-eastern Europe, Open Society Institute, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Edmonton (September, 2003) Host: Canadian Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies. Budapest (December, 2004) Host: Andrassy University.