



James Gow. *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. xii + 343 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10916-1.

Reviewed by Tobias K. Vogel (New School for Social Research)

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Dayton Revisited

Over the course of four years, the international community undertook three sustained attempts to bring an end to the violence in former Yugoslavia. The European Community (EC) brokered a cease-fire on the island of Brioni in July 1991, ending the brief war in Slovenia. The EC effort continued with the recognition of Slovenia, Croatia, and later Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, but failed to secure peace or an overall agreement. After the deployment of the first United Nations peace-keeping force in Croatia in early 1992 following a U.N.-mediated truce, and with intensifying conflict in Bosnia, the nature of international involvement changed, leading the United States to assume new responsibilities. But U.S. involvement in effect killed the first comprehensive peace plan for Bosnia, drafted by EC envoy Lord Owen and the U.N.'s Cyrus Vance, in the spring of 1993. While the conflict in Croatia was resolved militarily in the summer of 1995, American diplomacy finally scored a victory with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords for Bosnia in November of that year. It is the history of these efforts that James Gow has chronicled in his *Triumph of the Lack of Will*.

The Vance-Owen Peace Plan looks far better today than it did when it was first presented in early 1993. This is due not so much to Lord Owen's recent revisionist attempts in the form of diplomatic memoirs[1] as to the problems the international community has encountered in implementing the Dayton Peace Accords of November 1995. The Bosnian municipal elections this past summer highlighted how central adequate implementation is to any lasting solution, and the coming months constitute a major test for the international community's resolve to tackle delicate issues such as refugee return, freedom of movement, and the arrest of war criminals.

To the extent that any peace plan is only as good as its implementation, a comparison between Vance-Owen and Dayton may be unfair, although well drafted plans certainly make implementation easier. Even taking this into

account, however, Vance-Owen remains superior to the triumph of American diplomacy. Dayton, in Gow's analysis, surrendered standard international principles such as non-recognition of territorial gains by force and resistance to "ethnic cleansing"—principles that were, to a certain extent, upheld by Vance-Owen. It was these principles that the Clinton administration used to justify its opposition to Vance-Owen.

This is the central paradox in the international efforts to bring peace to former Yugoslavia, and one that Gow discusses passionately and convincingly. The incoming Clinton administration cloaked its rejection of Vance-Owen in moral terms as resistance to partition, for which the plan was seen as a blueprint. But rejection not only led to two more years of bloodshed, including some of the worst massacres in Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Srebrenica, it also resulted in a peace settlement that is hardly more than a fragile cease-fire and in effect partitions Bosnia-Herzegovina along ethnic lines, consolidating the results of "ethnic cleansing." The strict dichotomy between morality and strategy that was so prominent and disturbing in American discussions of Bosnia, a discussion that pitted moralist interventionists against realist abstentionists, led to the paradoxical result that, while Vance-Owen was ostensibly rejected on moral grounds, what came to replace it was far worse in almost every respect.

In the meantime, peace efforts gave way to attempts at conflict management: Bosnia had become a humanitarian rather than political problem, and the international community restricted itself to feed civilians through the winter so they could be expelled—or shot—in spring. This state of affairs was consolidated with the designation of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees as the official international lead agency in Bosnia. This situation was the worst conceivable combination of realist abandonment and moralist intervention, and its legacy continues to haunt the war-ravaged country today.

Diplomatic histories, and with them diplomats' memoirs, are not the favorite fare of this reviewer. Lord Owen's memoirs of his days as European envoy to the peace talks in London and Geneva made an exception, but the book never quite managed to allay the suspicion that perhaps too much of it was written in self-defence. No such agenda exists in James Gow's case, which makes his book the first comprehensive scholarly work on the diplomatic history of the Yugoslav wars. But, more than that, he has written a well-balanced, nuanced, and indeed, engaging account of Western attempts to mediate and intervene in former Yugoslavia. While Gow, lecturer in the Department of War Studies at London's King's College, does not shrink from unambiguous statements where they are in order—as when calling the “safe areas” plans “a project of inaction, unsafe areas and future headaches” (p. 248)—, his analysis is not marred by any self-serving taking of sides.

The two main points of his analysis are that “the Bosnian conflict and the Yugoslav war as a whole could have been drawn to a close two and a half years [before Dayton] at the time of the Vance-Owen Plan,” and that “the international community got less from the agreements negotiated at Dayton than it would have from implementation of the Vance-Owen Plan” (p. 299). In other words, “similarly strong U.S. support for implementation of Vance-Owen in 1993 would have ended the war two and a half years sooner, and on better terms” (p. 314). The decisive political change between Vance-Owen and Dayton was reinvigorated American leadership. Gow presents his account in four parts, each comprising two chapters: early diplomatic activities, military operations on the ground, the major players' motivations and actions, and the two major peace plans. A first, introductory chapter deals with the background to the crisis, analyzing “The Yugoslav Problem.”

Gow's interpretation is not favorable to international diplomacy generally and American leadership in particular. The West essentially blundered from beginning to end, and we might add that the Dayton process continues to be marred by the indecision and blundering that characterized so much of past international action in former Yugoslavia. The crucial failure consisted, in Gow's analysis, in not backing up diplomatic pressure with the will to use military force if necessary. Far from acknowledging its own failure in Bosnia, however, the West continued its engagement after Vance-Owen was killed off by the Americans—an engagement that was not less effective for being purely symbolic or humanitarian. Constant declarations that the results of “ethnic cleansing” and territorial conquest would not be tolerated, that the

mostly Muslim civilian victims of a war that was openly directed at them would not be abandoned, and that decisive Western action was imminent, consistently failed to produce tangible results since they were so visibly not backed up by the resolve to use military force. Hence Gow's title: *Triumph of the Lack of Will*.

The relationship between force and more traditional instruments of multilateral conflict management is discussed at length, but this discussion highlights the one serious problem with Gow's book. While the broad picture he draws of international efforts to end the violence in former Yugoslavia is generally accurate and convincing, the details tend to be blurry and confusing (as are the maps). His point about the decisive impact of Western reluctance to use force is an important one, but it is not entirely clear to me why we need a detailed account of the military deployment on the ground as provided following page 112 and, with respect to Macedonia, page 122. Such detail would be appropriate in a military history of the Yugoslav conflict, but in a diplomatic history a longer, more vigorously argued discussion of the political context of such deployments would have been more welcome.

A related problem I found is in Gow's treatment of the major actors' motivations. His aim is to provide a “comparative analysis of perspectives and politics in the five major [sic] capitals of the countries which formed the Contact Group” (p. 157). The Contact Group countries took divergent approaches to the issues of recognition of breakaway republics and the use of force as a result of “differing perceptions of the conflict and ... a disparity in objectives” (p. 182). More precisely, as is made clear in Gow's account of France's take on the conflict, interests colored analysis from the beginning: “In true Cartesian style France had established principles and objectives and its interpretation of events in Yugoslavia depended not so much on the events themselves as on whether they coincided with various French principles and objectives” (p. 158). This statement, however, is invalidated by his observation on the following page that France's initial, “Bonapartist, state-centric” approach was “downgraded as the conflict continued and Belgrade's culpability in it ... emerged more clearly.” He then goes on to explicitly state that France's “perception of the conflict gradually adjusted as events on the ground made clear where primary responsibility for the conflict lay” (p. 160). This is in direct contradiction to his earlier thesis that “principles and objectives,” not the “events themselves” guided France's interpretation of, and reaction to, the drama unfolding in Bosnia.

These are instances of one and the same problem—that the confusion surrounding the diplomatic history of Yugoslavia’s wars keeps intruding as soon as specific problems are at issue. While the reader gets a wealth of occasionally very detailed information, particularly on the operational and logistical aspects of the international military deployment in the region, and while Gow’s overall interpretation is sound and his evidence convincing, there is a certain gap between the broad picture and the fine detail. The book does not sufficiently establish how exactly the two are connected.

The laudable exception to this general problem is Gow’s discussion of U.S. policy; this is in fact where his skills as analyst become evident, and this seems to be the part that is most animated by a personal commitment to “tell the story.” Of course it is also the part that is most important in substantive terms. While hardly revolutionary, Gow’s account confirms almost every suspicion one could have had at the time about the motivations and workings of the only superpower’s foreign policy. It is a powerful indictment of a State Department and White House embroiled in Byzantine infights and opportunistic public opinion deliberations, engaged in irresponsible moralist posturing.

The U.S. was more than willing to let the Europeans deal with Yugoslavia when the problem first got the attention of policy-makers. These events are well known and have been nicely recounted by Laura Silber and Allan Little[2] and analyzed by Susan Woodward.[3] This policy became untenable once European failure became evident, and the U.S. became more involved when conflict broke out in Bosnia. The strong moralist aspects of American foreign policy were reinforced after Bill Clinton’s inauguration as President in early 1993, with rather problematic consequences as “the new White House had a tendency to pronounce on principle, prevaricate in practice and preempt the policies and plans of others” (p. 208), notably of the Europeans.

However, once again, I do not share Gow’s analysis that differences of opinion between the Europeans and the U.S. were the “result of divergent perceptions of the conflict” (p. 212), as these perceptions were from the start strongly colored by specific interests, such as the overriding U.S. objective not to commit any ground troops under any circumstances. Moreover, the “genuine moral impulse” for increased U.S. action in Bosnia (p. 214) looks as suspicious to me (and many others) as does Gow’s assertion that key policy-makers considered there was “a

strong emotional and moral issue to be addressed.” If the President’s moral outrage had been genuine, he would not have sacrificed his strong advocacy of reforms within Bosnia, and Gow admits as much in saying that there was “self-deception involved in making promises which were either untenable or which there was [sic] no intention of honouring” (p. 221).

Such problems of analysis are compounded by an almost insulting lack of editing (insulting to both the reader and the author), making a very bad book of a very fine analysis. While some editorial mishaps are merely amusing—as for instance the remark in chapter seven (p. 180) that a more comprehensive treatment of the topic at hand may be found in chapter seven, or the misrepresentation of the Bavarian Christian Social Union as “Christian Socialist”—, others are less so. A sentence such as the one found on page 318 (“More optimistically, the test over time of the Tribunal and again of international political will must be to bring an element of international justice to Bosnian [sic] in the future”) is not only extremely bothersome to read, but even a close reading does not yield any comprehensible meaning. Despite a footnote to the contrary, there is no bibliography. A contorted syntax makes the text hard to read, innumerable typographical errors increase the irritation, and a sometimes confusing organization of the material obfuscates an essentially sound and convincing analysis. These are all problems that could have been eradicated with careful—in fact, even just some—editing, but for whatever reason, Columbia University Press and its British counterpart, Hurst, chose not to provide it. It is incomprehensible and disturbing that a major academic publisher refuses to give an important text the attention and care it needs and merits.

Notes:

[1]. David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995).

[2]. Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: TV Books/Penguin, 1996).

[3]. Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995.

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