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Dennison I. Rusinow. *Yugoslavia: Oblique Insights and Observations.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008. 400 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4361-7; $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-6010-2.

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An American Sage on Yugoslavia

Today the fate of the South Slav lands may seem as bleak and inglorious as that of the defeated states of the American South after the 1861-65 Civil War. But, writing in 1966, Dennison Rusinow convincingly argued that "Yugoslavia [is] a place of far greater importance than its size and strength, or even its strategic location, would seem to warrant" (p. 51). The bold decentralization in the context of one-party Marxist rule set it apart from all other communist states. After breaking with Josef Stalin and the Soviet Union in 1948, the architect of the state, Josip Broz Tito, performed an adroit balancing act between East and West. Yugoslavia remained aloof from the Warsaw Pact and came increasingly to rely on credits and loans from the International Monetary Fund. Tito's leadership of the nonaligned movement in the 1950s and 1960s provided Yugoslavia with a degree of international stature which no Balkan state has ever enjoyed since the era of national states began for this contested corner of Europe in the 1830s.

Dennison Rusinow first visited Yugoslavia in 1953 while a graduate student at the University of Oxford. In 1963, after completing a doctorate there on the history of the lands Italy inherited from the Hapsburg Empire, he began a twenty-five-year association with the American Universities Field Staff, for whom he supplied regular reports on the kaleidoscopic reality of modern Yugoslavia. It is hard for him to conceal his empathy with Yugoslavia, "the garden of nationalities," to use Johann Gottfried von Herder's phrase, struggling to put internecine rivalry and hatred behind it through egalitarian policies overlain by extensive autonomy for nearly all of its ethnic components.

Rusinow's careful eye for detail and ability to do justice to the medley of Yugoslav life with a colorful phrase is shown in part 1, called "Oblique Insights." He examines how the experiment in economic "self-management" evolved in practice through describing the arrival of supermarkets from the late 1950s and, more improbably, how the stable in Slovenia breeding the Lipizaner horses, originally developed for the Hapsburg court, fell under the control of an import-expert firm. It is in this section that most attention is given to Serbia, a village feast being described in the summer of 1963 followed by a brief account of apartment life in the new Belgrade being constructed around the same time. He periodically forsakes high politics in the rest of the volume as when he describes the *korso*, the traditional evening promenade which, at the start of 1980, he observed in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, where it "exceeded all others in its intensity and vivacity" (p. 284).

Part 2, entitled "Crisis Moments," comprises the bulk of the volume. The first report explores the conflict between liberals and conservatives in the power structure that, following the removal in 1966 of Aleksandar Rankovic, head of the security services, resulted in an ambiguous and temporary victory for the former. Rusinow's ability to crisply sum up a complex set of events is well illustrated here. For him the conflict that brewed from the mid 1960s "contains elements of a clash of generations, of quasi-Marxist class conflict under socialism, of regional differences, and, hence, of a conflict among Yugoslav nationalities, plus elements of a simple power struggle and clash of ideologies" (p. 54). An impasse occurred due to an inability to progress from liberal authoritarianism to a conventional democracy. The resulting political frustrations, combined with growing economic strains, led to inter-ethnic tensions resuscitating even before the architect of the distinctive socialist commonwealth, Tito, went to his rest in 1980. His remarkable skills as a mediator, which continued to be exercised into his eighties, are particularly well described in Rusinow's account of the short-lived Belgrade student revolt of 1968. The episode is meticulously reconstructed and shows his skills as a miniaturist able to unpack and

coolly analyze what to less experienced observers was a bewildering flare-up. These and dozens of other reports were published and therefore available to the Yugoslav authorities. Censorship was a hallmark of the system, which may have required Rusinow to abstain from providing any frank portraits of Tito, the ultimate arbiter and lynchpin of the system. He shows how the elaborate decentralized arrangements, meant to steady the country after he was gone, were unable to promote elite consensus. Because the 1980s is largely overlooked, the fate of the social contract with the working class, meant to bury toxic nationalism by ensuring that the state was the guarantor of acceptable living standards, is not examined.

The inevitably small section of reportage collected in this volume mainly concentrates on how the doctrine of national self-rule was modified in the ethnic patchwork of the western Balkans, "where pure ethnic boundaries among states are impossible and where Great Power interests interact and would inevitably dominate minuscule but still ethnically heterogeneous national states" (pp. 298-99).

Tito feared the capacity of a divisive past to blow away the communist experiment, but instead of coming to terms with the wartime bloodletting that saw 11 percent of the population die violently in the Second World War, his regime preferred to keep the past "under the surface, un-attended, un-healed, unappeased."[1]

Enmity between Serbs and Croats, which first erupted in earnest in 1918, and contributed in no small measure to the wartime fratricide, was rightly viewed as posing particular danger to a state based on the unity of the Yugoslav working class. No less than one-third of the volume comprises four lengthy chapters dedicated to the crisis in Croatia that started at the end of the 1960s. A popular and youthful party leadership pushed demands for even fuller autonomy with symbols of sovereignty. This group was more liberal than nationalist but it linked up with noncommunist and openly nationalist elements, and by the autumn of 1971 Tito felt obliged to reassert central party discipline and authority.

Rusinow endeavors to be detached, but he openly admitted in his 1971 report that he was glad the Croatian nationalist upsurge had been checked while being sad at the arbitrary nature of the crackdown, and concerned about the future: "Observers should not pretend that they can or do avoid making judgments" (p. 136). In particular he was keen to challenge the assumption that "Croatia and Croatian Communists must always lie on the 'liberal' and 'progressive' side of the political barricade … with Slovenia … economically and socially the most developed part of Yugoslavia." He believed that such reasoning was "based on unverified assumptions about … a deterministic relationship between levels of economic and social development and levels of actual or potential modernization" (p. 109).

Republican centers grew in influence as "the penultimate arbiters, under Tito, of Yugoslav politics" (p. 140). Nevertheless, it was without liberal reformers in both of the pivotal republics, the Serbian party witnessing the purge of pro-Yugoslav liberals in 1972. A process of "negative selection" saw them replaced by obedient apparatchiks who talked wooden language and were unable or unwilling to stem the rise of nationalism in Serbia in the later 1980s, (the reader having a brief and somewhat unexpected encounter with Slobodan Milosevic in the last chapter). It is a pity that elite developments in the post-Tito era do not find a place in this volume. By 1988, the U.S. academic body which had commissioned Rusinow's work was bankrupt and he was poised to return to the United States, when perhaps his insider knowledge was needed the most. The main Atlantic democracies were reliant on information from diplomats who were often disinclined to move outside Belgrade to view conditions in parts of the federation where unscrupulous forces were stoking conflict. The myopia of the West helped to ensure that not only Yugoslavia hurtled to a tragic demise but many of the benefits of its own ambiguous victory in the Cold War were frittered away. This book is a fitting monument to the scholarship of someone with unrivaled long-term knowledge of Yugoslavia who had the analytical insights and journalistic gifts to bring the country alive for many of those fascinated by the Yugoslav experiment.

Note

[1]. Gail Stokes, "Nationalism, Responsibility, and the People-as-One," *Studies in European Thought* 46, nos. 1-2 (June 1994): 94.

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