

**Srećko M. Djaja.** *Die politische Realität des Jugoslawismus (1918-1991). Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Bosnien-Herzegowinas.* München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002. 317 pp. EUR 39,00, gebunden, ISBN 978-3-486-56659-8.



**Reviewed by** Florian Bieber

**Published on** HABSBURG (February, 2003)

## A Political History of the Yugoslav Idea

This is an ambitious book, surveying the political idea and reality of Yugoslavism spanning two Yugoslavias. The current volume by Bosnian historian Srećko Djaja offers a continuation of his earlier works on confessionalism and nationality under Ottoman rule (until 1804) and his study on the development of Bosnia under Austro-Hungarian rule.[1] In his new book, instead of focusing exclusively on Bosnia-Herzegovina, Djaja combines a more general overview of the political development of Yugoslavia with a case study of Bosnia.

With this study Djaja pursues two sometimes contradictory aims: First, he seeks to write a history of the political project of Yugoslavia and thus offer clues for understanding its dissolution. Second, the author wants to close gaps in the historiography of Yugoslavia and Bosnia by offering a study of confessional and cultural organizations in Bosnia and (cursory) the rest of Yugoslavia. In three chapters, the book covers Royal and Communist Yugoslavia, as well as Bosnia. In addition, the developments during World War Two are also discussed. In fact, the comprehensive scope of the

book and the selection of the time frame, i.e. the duration of Yugoslavia as a state, make this book more a study of the state and less that of the idea. As Djaja himself details, more often than not there was only little Yugoslavism in Yugoslavia.

What makes this book particularly interesting and sets it apart from general histories of Yugoslavia is the study of what would today be called "civil society" and "NGOs", offering fascinating insights into the support for Yugoslavism (or lack thereof) from "below". Djaja traces the relationship of Catholic, Islamic and Serbian Orthodox clerical and laymen organizations to the Yugoslav state. Particularly insightful is also the study of the essentially (Yugo)Slav *Sokol* organizations. Parallel to the political history of the first Yugoslavia, the *Sokol*, after a brief union between 1919 and 1922, began to separate along national lines over irreconcilable differences on the nature of the state. What clearly emerges from Djaja's study is that in the first Yugoslavia, the idea of Yugoslavism was not only absent at the level of political parties, but also -- not really surprisingly -- among cultural and religious organizations.

The author traces the relationship between cultural and religious organization on one, the state on the other and the idea of Yugoslavism on the third corner of a triangle. Dzaja details how it was only after 1929 that the generally conservative and semi-authoritarian state actively sought to impose a "Yugoslav" identity based on the concept of a unified Yugoslav nation with Serbs, Slovenes and Croats being merely divisions within the larger nation.

However, the evidence the author supplies in regard to support (or withholding thereof) of cultural and religious communities suggests that even during the period of the royal dictatorship (1929-1934) no concerted attempt was made to impose Yugoslavism. The reason for this was simple: There were not enough "Yugoslavs" with whom such a project could be promoted, not to mention take root. As a consequence, the only partners were unitarist Serb organizations and mostly marginal organizations and groups of intellectuals among the other nations of Yugoslavia. Generally, more often than not imposed "Yugoslav" structures and concepts were less based on some Yugoslav ideology, but rather on the authoritarian tendencies of the state. The first Yugoslavia effectively represented the insincere attempt to create a Yugoslav nation without Yugoslavs.

In his study of the second Yugoslavia, the author runs into greater difficulties. Genuine non-governmental cultural organizations are rare and only existed in the immediate post-war period and during the decay of the state. Dzaja's book is excellent when describing the slow erosion of pluralism in the cultural sphere during the first years of the second Yugoslavia. It is equally interesting when describing the 1980s in Bosnia. Here the author can draw from the archives of the leading Bosnian Communist politician during the time, Branko Mikulic.

Although the author describes the structures and institutions of Communist rule, the contents of official Yugoslavism, especially in cultural orga-

nizations remains largely untouched. Thus the book has little to offer in understanding the reasons why Yugoslavism failed to take hold when it could claim some genuine popularity. There is still only little scholarship which helps us to cut through the terminological thicket of Communism to see what forms of cultural, social and political activities during Communist Yugoslavia helped maintain its popular support.

Additionally, Dzaja does not offer much detail on the semi-autonomous cultural institutions in Yugoslavia, such as the various academies of sciences or writers associations, which did in some cases play a crucial role in promoting nationalism during the 1980s. The analysis of Yugoslavism and its alternatives in these institutions could offer a valuable parallel narrative to the official developments. The author also just briefly discusses the debates among Muslims over national identity, relationship towards Bosnia and the adoption of the name Bosniaks. It would have been useful to extend this analysis both in detail and to relate it to similar debates among Macedonians and possibly Montenegrins in Communist Yugoslavia.

Dzaja's very critical view of the supporters of the two Yugoslavias leads him to conclude that "the Yugoslav package was made twice without or with only pro-forma democracy. The consequences are known" (p.272). He suggests that the nature of Royal and Communist Yugoslavia were inherently flawed, and that support for the project rested essentially only among a small Serbian elite in the first and a more amorphous group of Communists in the second Yugoslavia.

While there can be little doubt that the construction of the state was flawed, especially in the case of the first Yugoslavia, the fact that the second Yugoslavia emerged rapidly as a dictatorship after World War Two does not set it apart from most other countries in Eastern Europe and does not per se delegitimize the state. The failure of the Yugoslav project to take hold when many inhabitants of Yugoslavia embraced it at times of pros-

perity requires a more nuanced explanation. It is less the construction of states which determine their success or failure – otherwise Yugoslavia would be in greater company – but the ways in which states create legitimacy for their existence among the population and possible alternative elites. One of the key problems of Communist Yugoslavia was that it never fully managed to convince the alternative elites in intellectual circles of its own legitimacy and desirability.

Generally the book is well written and full of rich information, such as national representation in different institutions, well illustrated with numerous tables. Only the structure of the book is somewhat problematic. The author decided to discuss the overall political and cultural history of Yugoslavism/Yugoslavia in the first part and focus on Bosnia in the second part. The reader is thus taken on a chronological roller-coaster, which is further accentuated by the fact that in the Bosnia chapter particularly the author jumps between different episodes in the second Yugoslavia, much to the detriment of the book's readability. A more rigid structure and the closer connection between the overall Yugoslav picture with illustrations from Bosnia would have made a stronger case for the arguments of the author.

Despite these flaws, this is an interesting and rich study of the political history of the Yugoslav idea. The author is very careful in offering a balanced view of Yugoslavia and Bosnia, which certainly adds to its relevance in a field frequently filled with more one-sided studies. Its strengths lie in combining conventional political history with social history of cultural associations. This combination is particularly strong in the discussion of the first Yugoslavia, while it runs into the aforementioned difficulties when describing the Communist era.

Note:

[1]. Srecko M. Dzaja, *Konfessionalität und Nationalität Bosniens und der Herzegowina. Voremanzipatorische Phase, 1463-1804* (Südosteu-

ropäische Arbeiten 80, München: Oldenbourg, 1984); *ibid.*, *Bosnien-Herzegowina in der österreichisch-ungarischen Epoche (1878 - 1918). Die Intelligentsia zwischen Tradition und Ideologie* (Südosteuropäische Arbeiten 93, München: Oldenbourg, 1994).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** Florian Bieber. Review of Srecko M. Dzaja. *Die politische Realität des Jugoslawismus (1918-1991). Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Bosnien-Herzegowinas*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7211>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.