

CSEES Newsletter (Center for Slavic and East European Studies) 1995

University of California at Berkeley

Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War

By Susan Woodward. Brookings Institution, 1995.

At last, a book has been written that makes sense of the senseless. Susan Woodward's *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* is the most outstanding analysis of the Yugoslav disaster to date. Woodward, a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution, uses a culturally sensitive political-economic framework to trace the origins and continuation of the war in former Yugoslavia.

Woodward is one of the few American scholars who has a profound understanding of both the changes in the international environment that made the war possible and the internal dynamics of the war. After studying and teaching about Yugoslavia for many years before the war's outbreak, Woodward served in 1994 as a senior adviser to Yasushi Akashi, the special representative of UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali for former Yugoslavia. Woodward's unique combination of long-term, intimate knowledge of the area along with behind-the-scenes policy experience situates her well for writing such a book. Unlike many of the recent works on this war, Woodward's does not try to wallop the reader over the head with gory, emotion-heightening stories, inciting him or her to choose an ethnic side as the war-causing enemy. Her level-headed analysis of the internal and international political developments leading up to and fueling the war is a refreshing departure from the many variations on the "ancient hatreds" theme.

Woodward's primary explanation for the war is clear: it originated in the breakdown of institutions, embodied in the Yugoslav state, that facilitated peaceful negotiation of political and economic conflicts. The war was not inevitable and its origins were not in atavistic ethnic hatred. Woodward completes her next task, explaining how and why that state broke down and what arose in its place, with a detailed, nuanced, and complex analysis.

In the first part of the book, Woodward traces the gradual demise of carefully balanced multiethnic institutions that supported the rights, security, and well-being of its people. Woodward argues that Yugoslavia was not an artificial state (for the war, then, would never have arisen—there would be nothing to fight about if the divisions were so clear), but a highly interdependent one. She maintains that Yugoslavia's special sociocultural fabric and geopolitical and economic position were as central to its success as to its eventual demise. During the cold war (and indeed, for most of its history), Yugoslavia straddled the divide between East and West, and, unlike any other country in the region, maintained economic and political relationships with the Communist East, the non-Communist West, and the less developed Third World. But this balancing act has always been difficult to sustain.

Woodward argues that in the aftermath of the cold war, the absence of international agreement on how to create new institutions for a "new world order" left Yugoslavia in a precarious position: "it did not fit any of the categories for which international and regional organizations were designed." Woodward sees Yugoslavia's destruction as primarily due to structural forces, internal reacting to external, that tore the country apart. Although she does not blame single actors or

figures, Woodward criticizes both international organizations and individual countries that attempted, at a time of changing norms and security regimes, to apply outdated, generic cold-war policy prescriptions to Yugoslavia, a country that has historically been the exception to such rules.

In particular, Woodward singles out the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for prescribing economic liberalism with political conservatism in the 1980s, which, ironically, fueled Milosevic's political-economic agenda and, more importantly, sparked heated political battles by forcing a decentralized Yugoslavia to centralize financial institutions for debt payment contrary to the will of its republics, especially Slovenia.

Second, the European Community (EC, now European Union) helped to further conflict with its contradictory policy of supporting ethnolnational self-determination as a general principle while insisting on maintaining the administrative borders of the former Yugoslav republics as internationally recognized. international borders.

Third, Germany, under the leadership of the long-serving foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, helped destroy the multiethnic state by forcing the hand of the other EC countries in recognizing Slovenian and Croatian independence. Finally, the US, among other blunders, encouraged the otherwise willing Bosnian Muslims in late January 1993 not to sign the only peace plan that moved away from Bosnian partition purely by ethnic group—the Vance-Owen plan.

As her criticisms make clear, Woodward, in keeping with her position as a nonpartisan scholar and adviser, promotes only policies that work toward developing non-ethnic political identities and individual human rights—her unwillingness to actively take sides should not be read as implicit sympathy for the Serbs.

In looking for solutions to the conflict, Woodward contends that the international community must become aware of the consequences of its actions, for “Yugoslav actors, by habit of many centuries, [see] international action as a resource to exploit. International publicity, recognition, humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping forces (become) endogenous elements in their political strategies” (p. 397). Thus actors on the ground respond to the West, which, for its part, has displayed disinterest or a lack of understanding for the conflict and engaged in futile debates, such as whether the war is an ethnic civil war or a Serb-led war of aggression. From this ambivalence and misunderstanding have come such solutions as “containing (or bombing) the aggressors” or “letting them fight it out on the ground.” The proper response of the international community is represented by neither of these policies nor by the decision to try war criminals, which has tended to make exclusive nationalists feel victimized.

Instead, Woodward argues that institutions must be constructed that regulate economic, cultural, and political conflict: “to find lasting, stable solutions to the Yugoslav crisis, outsiders have to think about supporting the development of the political institutions and political climate within the area that [will] enable the people themselves to generate solutions.” Since Woodward does not describe what specific policies this might entail, one is left to draw one's own inferences.

Another missing piece in *Balkan Tragedy* is a good explanation for Macedonia. Woodward has successfully argued that generic, poorly conceived economic and political intrusions fueled the war in multiethnic Bosnia and Croatia. But these same tactics were used in Macedonia, which, thus far, has not imploded. Could US, UN, and NATO policy have stumbled on success in this area? Or are other factors responsible for the relative stability of this "state"?

A final unanswered question lies in Woodward's investigation of the effectiveness of economic sanctions. She concludes that "the sanctions, instead of undermining the sitting regime, increased the power of the government and of Milosevic personally," as Serbia became cut off from all outside influence. The sanctions, which only nurtured nationalist sentiments, "were more likely to exacerbate the causes of war and its escalation and expansion." While this was surely the case several years ago, now, after years of enduring the crippling international economic blockade, lifting the sanctions appears to have become a significant means of luring Milosevic to the bargaining table. While her analysis of the failure of sanctions as an instrument of international pressure is convincing, it is not clear how Woodward would account for recent events.

Outweighing these still-open questions are the many high points in *Balkan Tragedy*. Chapter Five, for example, offers an excellent analysis of the conflicting consequences of liberalization and democratization. Here Woodward reveals what many have learned in Africa and Latin America—liberalization is an extremely painful process that can easily run amok without sufficient state capacity to regulate the unavoidable corruption and disputes over property. Economic conflicts can become politicized and, in multiethnic societies, can escalate into competitions over national interest, identity, and territory. The addition of electoral politics gives politicians "the courage to escalate their demands and rhetoric and to sabotage negotiations."

In her analysis of Yugoslav institutions, Woodward examines a very interesting and often overlooked component in the prevention of conflict and warfare, the Yugoslav People's Army (YPA). She sets out to dispel the contention of many experts that the YPA was all along an instrument of the Serb nationalists. Under the old Yugoslav constitution, the YPA had voting rights on par with the six republics and two autonomous republics, giving it the nickname, the "ninth republic." During the movements for independence, the YPA was the only negotiating partner that would, for its institutional survival, vote for non-ethnic solutions to political problems. Woodward explains that the army was "ideologically a communist institution, dogmatically anti-nationalist," and while it was staffed by many Serbs, largely from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, it was not a "Serbian" army. But early EC and US mistrust and unwillingness to recognize the positive potential of the YPA as a nonpartisan negotiator helped split this institution apart. Because the international community continued to equate ethnic origin with political loyalty, the YPA was both driven to and pulled toward Serb nationalists.

Overall, Woodward's focus is on the interplay between endogenous and exogenous forces that have encouraged all sides on the ground to divide and fight with one another. But peace may now be in sight. What are the prospects for this peace? While this book was written over a year before the signing of the Dayton peace plan this December in Paris, Woodward's masterful dissection of self-contradictory policies and misplaced debates aids in understanding the fundamental problem with this plan. While the Dayton plan has stopped big battles on the ground, (which of course is

no small accomplishment) it reflects the continuation of Western inability to decide whether to favor self-determination or multiethnicity. Under the plan, Bosnia is to be a unitary state, but with two, sometimes three, ethnationally determined armies, currencies, and local administrations. Thus institutional tensions similar to those that allowed for the outbreak of war are still present. This does not bode well for the future of Bosnia as a multiethnic, sovereign state.

Lise Morje Svenson, Ph.D. student,
Political Science Department,
University of California,
Berkeley