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SABRINA RAMET, *THE THREE YUGOSLAVIAS: STATE-BUILDING AND LEGITIMATION, 1918–2005*. WOODROW WILSON CENTER PRESS WITH INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006, XXII + 817 P.

*Reviewed by* Dragan Bakic\*

Professor Sabrina Ramet is a well-known author specialising in the history of Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav era who distilled her decades-long study of the subject in this book. Being a political scientist, she analyses the tormented history of the South Slavs' state in the twentieth century through the paradigm of their inability to establish political legitimacy as the basis for state-building project. Ramet explains the tenets of political legitimacy in the first chapter setting a theoretical framework for her writing; these are equated with the values of liberal project comprising, above all, the rule of law, individual rights, tolerance, respect for the harm principle and state neutrality in religious matters. The central argument of political legitimacy is, of course, unobjectionable in itself but also rather self-evident, which thus raises doubt as to its utility as historical explanation. Tito's Yugoslavia, for example, was communist dictatorship emerging from civil war and relying on terror and repression for its continued existence; it was, as any other dictatorship, an antithesis of liberal values and free expression of popular will. What is then the point of proving something that is axiomatic, namely that a communist dictatorship collapsed because it failed to establish the rule of law and lacked political legitimacy? Another problem is that retrospective measuring of historical events against the criteria firmly grounded in our times is always at serious risk to neglect or misinterpret contemporary historical context and consequently present a distorted reflection of the past.

Be that as it may, Ramet embarks on a lengthy exposition of the history of three Yugoslav states – the interwar Kingdom

of Yugoslavia (1918–1945), Tito's communist Yugoslavia (1945–1991) and the rump Yugoslavia consisting of Serbia and Montenegro alone (1992–2003), the final stage of the country's demise – with a view to vindicating her hypothesis. Unfortunately, even the most cursory glance at the content of Ramet's book reveals glaring methodological deficiencies that render it completely and utterly unreliable. To begin with, one would expect the writer of a Yugoslav history to thoroughly research primary material in the Yugoslav archives unless he/she opted to draw entirely on secondary sources – which is also legitimate. Ramet has done neither. She has undertaken research primarily in the National Archives of the USA instead and managed to consult a single fond in the Croatian national archives in Zagreb (*Hrvatski državni arhiv*). She did not set a foot in a single archive in Belgrade, not even the Archives of Yugoslavia (*Arhiv Jugoslavije*) the very name of which suggests its indispensability for what she was doing. In addition, her secondary sources clearly show the tremendous extent of her pro-Croat and anti-Serb bias. Ramet heavily draws on a number of Croat authors many of whom were not reputable scholars or, for that matter, not scholars at all; they are often people who had participated in the events they wrote about later or recounted in interviews that Ramet conducted with them; some are widely regarded as prominent Croat nationalists. It should be obvious to any undergraduate student that their accounts could not be taken at their face value before being critically examined and compared with other sources includ-

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ing those from “the other side”. The same can be said of Ramet’s use of newspapers including the most extravagant propaganda. Needless to say, secondary sources and literature of Serbian provenance are conspicuous by their absence. Even non-Serb authors offering more balanced assessment of Yugoslav history are ignored, except in a few instances where their works were dismissed, although the latter are given in the bibliography for the sake of appearances.

A full list of factual errors, misinterpretations, intentional omissions, contradictions, not to speak of typos would be impossible to compile here due to the space constraints of a review. What follows is just a brief overview of the most astonishing instances of the abovementioned which proves beyond any doubt that the author was not entirely guided by scholarly agenda. From the very beginning, Ramet presents a picture of the failed attempts to form a viable Yugoslav state in which the Serbs are invariably cast in the role of vicious villains. The principle of national self-determination to which royal Yugoslavia owed its birth is disputed but Ramet does not suggest what the alternative was. With the benefit of hindsight, she inveighs against the fact that no referendum was held concerning the issues of union, dynasty and internal organisation of the state, i.e. constitutional framework (p. 36). It seems that it does not occur to her that referendum was not deemed necessary because of what she notes herself: the Corfu Declaration of 1917 settled the first two issues by an agreement between the representatives of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (p. 42).

Nevertheless, the author is certain that the Serbs never entertained the possibility of treating the others as equals (pp. 35–39). To prove this point, Ramet puts forward a number of blatant falsehoods – to be sure, the Serbs did have a preponderant position which is hardly surprising given that Serbia had been an

independent country for four decades and a member of the victorious Entente Powers coalition. She claims all Macedonians to have been pro-Bulgarian because of which the Serbs terrorised them and “the Macedonians fought back”, a reference to pro-Bulgarian Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation’s (IMRO) “resistance” (p. 47). This is certainly a novel interpretation of what is generally agreed upon in historiography – leaving aside the question of the competing Serbian and Bulgarian claims on Macedonia – namely, that IMRO carried out terrorist campaign in Macedonia against the Yugoslav authorities and those among local population who were loyal to the new state, and that the authorities consequently clamped down on IMRO and their supporters among native population. In Montenegro, Ramet goes on, civil strife was waged between “the widely popular pro-independence ‘greens’ and the less popular but better armed pro-Serbia ‘whites’” (p. 47). In fact, the whites were more numerous, but perhaps that is less of a mistake than presenting the greens as willing to accept a union with Serbia provided that Montenegrins were recognised as citizens with equal rights when they actually wanted Montenegro to be part of a Yugoslav federation and maintained their loyalty to the ex-king Nikola Petrović. Incidentally, the greens regarded themselves as Serbs and not a separate Montenegrin nation, but that is not mentioned in the text. In her treatment of religious matters in this region, Ramet should rectify her factual error that there existed “the Montenegrin patriarchate”. The Croats are said to have been repressed by Serbs and the competency of what had been the Croatian autonomous province within Hungary severely reduced. This is backed by the often repeated but nevertheless inaccurate claim that Belgrade dissolved the Croatian Assembly (*Sabor*) (p. 52) which, in fact, dissolved itself more than

a month before the creation of Yugoslavia after having proclaimed itself unnecessary in the new Kingdom. Other false claims are simply bizarre: Ramet would have us believe, placing her trust in the brochure of an IMRO/Bulgarian propagandist published in Budapest in 1929, that the Yugoslav authorities “shipped large quantities of books from Croatia to Belgrade on the argument that they were no longer needed in Croatia” (p. 50). Another such source is sufficiently reliable for Ramet to reproduce from it that “more than 100,000 Croatia Catholics converted to Serbian Orthodoxy in 1935 alone” (p. 96).

Ramet’s account of the Second World War in Yugoslavia could best be described as closely following the lines of the communist-partisan mythology which served to justify Tito’s dictatorship after 1945 and have long since been deconstructed. Although she acknowledges the *Ustasha* genocide committed against the Serbs in the fascist Independent State of Croatia (NDH), she does not fully appreciate that the Yugoslavs mostly killed each other during the war. The revolutionary agenda of Tito’s partisans that put the seizure of power before the fighting against the Axis troops – though they certainly fought against the occupiers – is entirely overlooked. On the other hand, her interpretation of the royalist *Chetnik* movement might as well have been written by a communist apologist. Brushing aside that Dragoljub Mihailović’s fighters constituted a legitimate movement supported by the Yugoslav government-in-exile in London and were the first guerrilla force that rose to arms against the Germans in occupied Europe, as well as one of the participants in the waxing civil war, Ramet portrays them as refusing to engage against the Wehrmacht from the start and turning against the partisans despite Tito’s pleas to join forces (pp. 143–144). Nothing could be further from the truth. The Serbian insurrection start-

ed as early as 31 August 1941 when the *Chetniks* liberated the town of Loznica in western Serbia. Anyone slightly familiar with the history of Yugoslavia in the Second World War must be equally stunned to read that after the defeat in December 1941 “Mihailović’s Chetniks barely maintained any presence in Serbia” and that the centre of their “activity moved to the NDH” (p. 145). Ramet insists on the instances of *Chetnik* collaboration with the Axis, particularly with the Italians, although it is perfectly clear that such activities were designed to facilitate the struggle against the *Ustasha* and, as she unwillingly concedes, partisans were also prepared to make arrangements with the Germans, as in March 1943. All this does not prevent Ramet from laying down that “it is more than a bit disappointing that ... people can still be found who believe that the Chetniks were doing anything besides attempting to realise a vision of an ethnically homogeneous Greater Serbian state, which they intended to advance, in the short run, by a policy of collaboration with Axis forces” (p. 145). The true significance of this blatant misinterpretation becomes clear in later text covering more recent events.

Communist Yugoslavia emerged from the war and it was founded on the complex and often contradictory constitutional settlement that bred the seed of nationalist discontent – the federation consisted of six republics and two autonomous provinces within Serbia. Ramet’s treatment of the developments under Tito runs along the same pro-Croat and anti-Serbian lines as in the case of the interwar Kingdom. She sympathises with the surge of Croat nationalism peaking in 1971 (the so-called Croatian spring or MASPOK meaning “mass movement”). Ramet considers the nationalists from the ranks of the League of Communists of Croatia liberals just as Serbian liberals from their own section of the communist party – the latter, how-

ever, renounced nationalism and insisted that Serbia should mind her own business and not interfere with other republics. The opponents of Croatian nationalists within Croatia are dubbed “conservatives” although one should expect that Ramet would find their more liberal antinationalism closer to her heart. More specifically, Ramet discusses four alleged grievances of Croatian nationalists: “the use of textbooks to suppress Croatian national sentiment, the Serbianization of the Croatian language, the demographic displacement of Croats by Serbs, and the encouragement of Dalmatian sentiment in order to split Croatia in two” (p. 230). Without explicitly saying so, Ramet takes these complaints quite seriously although at least the latter two were unfounded to the point of being absurd. The claim that emigration of Croatian workers to Western Europe, for example, was a plot “to move able-bodied Croats out of the country, so that Serbs could take their places” (pp. 232–233) could only serve to point out pathological manifestations of chauvinistic hate. The language issue, in particular, reflected the depths of nationalistic frenzy as the Croatian intellectuals gathered in the cultural association *Matica hrvatska* repudiated the 1850 Vienna agreement between the prominent Serb and Croat philologists establishing the common Serbo-Croat language. Perhaps Ramet did not perceive this linguistic controversy as a manifestation of nationalism since, in her view, “pupils in Croatian elementary schools were exposed to the Cyrillic alphabet” (p. 312). She presumably knows that pupils in Serbia or, for that matter, Macedonia were equally “exposed” to the Latin alphabet in what was envisioned as a policy of upholding the equality of both alphabets throughout the country.

If Croats’ grievances were legitimate, then they must have been provoked from some quarters. Indeed, Ramet charges the Serbs with being affected with “nationalist chauvinism” both before and after the

fall of Aleksandar Ranković, a Serb and head of the security service; in fact, nationalism “animated a large portion of the Serbian population, from the peasantry to those on the rungs of power”. And yet all the evidence that the author advances for such a sweeping assertion amounts to a cryptic reference in a newspaper and the lame jibe uttered by the prominent Serbian communist Slobodan Penezić–Krcun who “sought to pay Tito a compliment by saying that he had only one shortcoming – he was not a Serb!” But this sort of logic does not come as a surprise when Ramet even explains the flare-up of Croatian nationalism in 1971 as a “reaction to the hegemonistic posture adopted by the Serbian and Montenegrin parties, the Serb communists within Croatia, and Ranković’s people in general” (pp. 242–243). The concrete nature of the hegemonistic posture during this time, however, is not addressed at all, whereas Ranković was ostracised from political life of Yugoslavia in 1966. The fixation on Ranković is very revealing as he is presented as something of a communist equivalent of Nikola Pašić and his Radicals, or “the Devil” as Ramet prefers to refer to them (p. 67). She professes that Ranković conducted “repressive Serbianization policies” which “were concentrated in Kosovo, Vojvodina, and Bosnia-Herzegovina (i.e., against the Albanians, the Hungarians, and the Muslims)”; the elevation of Bosnian Muslims to the status of one of the constituent Yugoslav nations is also construed to have been facilitated by Ranković’s downfall (p. 286). Once again, not a shred of evidence is provided for these categorical statements. One might wonder how it was possible for Serbian communists to suppress all other Yugoslavs at will and yet be so impotent at the same time to prevent virtual confederalisation of their own republic with anomalous status of the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina which

remained in Serbia but nearly became republics in their own right.

As for nationalism among Serbs in Croatia, it is said to have derived from their religious distrust felt towards Croats – perhaps a reference to their centuries-long experience with proselytism of the Roman Catholic Church, but the author remains vague – and the activities of the Serb cultural society *Prosvjeta*, “a forum for former Chetniks” (not a single name is given). In particular, Ramet finds it inadmissible that “Serbian nationalists” wanted an autonomous province within Croatia, or that *Prosvjeta* demanded that both Croatian and Serbian be recognised as official languages in Croatia and that the interests of the Serb community be protected through the agency of a Chamber for Interethnic Relations within the framework of the Croatian Assembly. It seems almost incredible that the author does not comprehend, for example, that the request concerning language was but a reaction to the Croatian nationalist demand for separation of Croatian from Serbian language: the use of Serbian as an official language in Croatia would be a logical ramification of what was, after all, championed by *Matica hrvatska*. This is a fine example of how Ramet turns hard facts upside down. She even poses a rhetorical question: “What would have been the reaction in Serbia if the Croats of Vojvodina had made the equivalent demand?” This would suggest that the Croats constituted a sizeable minority in Vojvodina and that was not the case – Hungarians were the largest minority there – and Vojvodina did enjoy autonomous status on account of its ethnic diversity (pp. 242–243).

The account of the history of both interwar and Tito’s Yugoslavia with all its blunders and distortions is but a prelude for the discussion of the latter’s breakup. This is explained in simple black and white terms: for all the deficiencies of other non-Serb actors, Slobodan Milošević

bore sole responsibility for the bloody war that ensued through his pursue of the Greater Serbian project. In Ramet’s view, that conflict was not a civil war, but rather Serbia’s war of aggression against Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH, and later Kosovo). The utility of Ramet’s previous gross distortions and misinterpretations of earlier history becomes evident in her account of the War of the Yugoslav Succession (1991–99). To begin with, she designates all “Serb nationalists”, which in her narrative means the vast majority of Serbs, as *Chetniks*. Since Milošević is said to have masterminded what Ramet qualifies as the Greater Serbian aggression, which is, as she assures us, the same political program as that pursued by *Chetniks*, it is only natural that the Serbian president rehabilitated the *Chetnik* movement and “even erected a monument to Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović” (p. 389). The said monument is a sheer fabrication and, in general, Milošević embraced communist legacy and partisan movement whereas his political opponents from the right stood for rehabilitation of *Chetniks*. But if facts do not fit in with Ramet’s construction, so much worse for the facts.

Historical falsification dating back to the Second World War is compounded here by another intentional misinterpretation: Ramet denounces “the Chetniks” for imposing the principle of ethnic condominium over majority rule in Bosnia insofar as they denied the right of Croats and Bosnian Muslims to detach BiH from Yugoslavia. She would no doubt be correct unless the constitution of BiH had been predicated on the principle that the three ethnic groups were constituent nations whose consensus was therefore necessary for any substantial change in the status of their republic. However, Ramet chooses to pass in silence over this crucial fact for understanding the outbreak of war in BiH (p. 419). Instead she proceeds with the list of pathological deviations typical of “Chetniks” which

includes their pride of “enjoying superior capacities for sexual performance” (p. 420). If one would expect that the author is, for good measure, equally harsh in her treatment of Croatia’s role in the war, one would be very much mistaken. Despite admission that Croat veterans’ organisation displayed the *Ustasha* version of Croatian flag and that Tudjman’s government fulfilled Pavelić’s dream of uprooting the Serbs from Croatia and strove to extend the Croatian borders at the expense of BiH, Ramet saw no parallel with the political program and practice of the NDH. In fact, she almost excused Tudjman’s territorial ambitions on the grounds that he truly believed what Ante Starčević and *Ustasha* had believed before him – that all Bosnian Muslims were Croats (pp. 421–422). More broadly, Ramet sees no inconsistency, to say the least, in the proposition that a multiethnic Yugoslavia had to disappear as an illegitimate creation while at the same time BiH had to be preserved at all costs regardless of the fact that it was a miniature version of Yugoslavia riddled with the same ethnic conflicts between its constituent nations and no more “legitimate” than Yugoslavia was.

The anti-Serbian pattern is also applied to what was going on in Kosovo. Ramet admits the pressure exerted on Serbs by their Albanian neighbours in the Albanian-run autonomous Serbian province which resulted in a massive exodus of the former throughout the 1980s and earlier. Nevertheless, she claims that the Serbs who had fled Kosovo from Albanian terror “began to talk of their own alleged sufferings and to demand special benefits in Kosovo”; because of that Serbia was “afire with nationalism” by 1986 (p. 305). Ramet would have us believe that from the 1970s until the late 1980s just a minority of Albanians favoured separatism (p. 511) although she herself described nationalist rioting in Kosovo in 1981 which has universally

been recognised as separatist manifestation. She would also have us believe that an estimated 400,000 Albanians fled from Kosovo from 1987 to 1989 (p. 512), a fantastic piece of information no doubt designed to justify what would happen in the following decade. “Albanians knew instinctively that the time for armed struggle had arrived”, reads Ramet’s explanation for the outbreak of insurgency led by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in 1998 (p. 513). Ramet admits that the findings of Finnish pathologist Helena Ranta gave lie to the official version of the alleged Račak massacre confirming that rather than being innocent Albanian civilians some of the dead were members of Serbian forces and others KLA terrorists (p. 511). Nevertheless, the refutation of this fabrication exploited as an excuse to threaten Serbia with force does not evince any kind of explanation. The ensuing negotiations at Rambouillet are grossly misinterpreted as having failed because of Belgrade’s rejection of a compromise which sought “to find a middle ground between the Serbian and Albanian positions” (p. 516). In reality, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was demanded under the threat of NATO military intervention to abandon Kosovo to NATO troops and agree to an eventual referendum in that province about its status which in practice meant to agree to an independent Kosovo. Since Belgrade refused this ultimatum reminiscent of Hitler’s dealing with Czechoslovakia in 1938 NATO embarked on the illegal bombing of Yugoslavia – without UN authorisation.

As it is well-known, the NATO campaign ended in the establishment of the UN-mandated Kosovo in 1999 which later, after the publication of this book, was recognised by a large number of states, but not the UN as a whole, as an independent state. Particularly cynical is Ramet’s subsuming of increasing ethnically motivated kidnappings of and assaults on

Kosovo Serbs after 1999 into the ordinary criminality rubric (p. 539). Such attitude is further emphasised when often fatal attacks on Serbs by “vengeance-minded Albanians” are simply put down to “the anger which had built up over more than a decade of repression by Milošević’s agents” (p. 542). Striving to vindicate her version of the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo in the late twentieth century Ramet again resorts to rewriting earlier history. One is simply astonished to read that the Albanians and Serbs “maintained civil and often friendly relations with each other well into the 1980’s” (p. 541). This incredulous claim designed to support the incredulous argument that it was Milošević’s rule alone that was responsible for what happened in Kosovo in the late 1990s runs contrary even against the evidence provided in the book. Indeed, Ramet herself identifies five periods since 1878 during which the Serbs were persecuted by Albanians and four periods during which the roles were reversed (p. 552).

The account of the War of the Yugoslav succession amounts to little more than a reproduction of wartime propaganda from the media outlets including, for example, the accusation levelled at the Bosnian Serb forces of systematically using rape to spread terror and drive non-Serbs from their homes (p. 430). Ramet is especially prone to turning a blind eye to the raging nationalism of the Franjo Tuđman government in Croatia and minimising its unashamed flirtation with the *Ustasha* legacy. In her interpretation, it was “rising Serbian nationalism” emerging from the Kosovo crisis that “in turn infected Serbs in Croatia, leading to renewed difficulties in Croatia” (p. 306). Ramet would even have us believe that the Croatian communists were about to win the elections in 1990 but “the rising tide of Serbian nationalism, both within Serbia and among the Serbs of Croatia, produced a backlash among Croats, who steamed to Tuđman’s

banner”. If Tuđman was guilty for anything that was his decision upon assuming the office to authorise the firing of Serbs from Croatia’s police because they constituted 75 per cent of policemen (p. 356)! One can only guess what the source for this extravagant claim was since the author omitted the reference. Ramet is also more than generous in treating Tuđman’s military involvement in BiH as opposed to the assistance that Milošević provided to Bosnian Serbs portrayed as aggressors – and war criminals – in their own native land. In a small but telling example she refers to “the Croatian liberation of Sanski Most” (p. 465) when speaking of the conquest of the predominantly Serb-populated town in western Bosnia in 1995 by the regular Croatian army.

Ramet’s interpretation of Yugoslavia’s demise is perhaps best summed up in her endorsement of the Croatian Deputy-Prime Minister in 1991/2, Zdravko Tomac’s “comparison of U.S. president [George] Bush’s handling of Milošević with Neville Chamberlain’s handling of Hitler in 1938” (p. 411). In addition to her profession that the Greater Serbian project was “articulated by Ilija Garašanin, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, Vladimir Karić, and others, and embraced by Nikola Pašić and ... King Aleksandar” (p. 99), a series of most important Serb political and cultural personages from the nineteenth and twentieth century, it becomes clear that she views the entire modern Serbian history as an uninterrupted quest for nationalist expansion. Such naked condemnation of an entire nation comes close to ethnic-cultural prejudice at best and spreading dangerous intolerance thinly veiled as scholarship at worst, something that is exact negation of Ramet’s avowed espousal of the liberal project, to borrow from her discourse. With this in view, an important question springs to mind: is there such a thing as illegitimate scholarship?