

EDITORIAL NOTE: CONFRONTING COLLAPSE

The fall of empires has always intrigued historians, not to mention politicians. Gibbons' attempt to probe the "mysteries" of the demise of the Roman Empire remains a classic to all those confronting the unenviable task of answering the questions "Why?" and "How?"

The virtual simultaneous collapse of the Soviet Union and of the Yugoslav Federation not surprisingly prompted most sovietologists to take on the challenge of unraveling the dynamics of the Bol'shoi Raspad of the USSR and of its Yugoslav counterpart. Even two members of this journal's editorial board, Reneo Lukic and Allen Lynch, recently collaborated in a comparative monograph in search of satisfactory answers, despite the obvious hurdle that the process of disintegration, the momentum of the raspad, may not be spent yet. Their efforts have by no means closed the book on the problem of solving the riddle of the failure of these two multi-national communist regimes. The puzzle remains, calling for further interim explanations. These explanations have generated a veritable cascade of articles and books seeking to offer a "definitive" diagnosis for events both unexpected and, so far, unprecedented, especially vis-à-vis the Soviet Union: e.g., why no civil war, yet?

In the case of Yugoslavia specifically, even before its break-up, a significant academic cottage industry had sprung up trying to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Federation since Tito's death in 1980. A fascinating, relatively unexamined dénouement literature came from out of the Soviet Union where, understandably, concerned government officials and party ideologues monitored the rise of ominous, centrifugal strains surfacing in Yugoslavia. Then, after 1991, began the international flood of publications on Yugoslavia's violent falling apart. So why another effort by *Nationalities Papers*? Why devote an entire number, a Special Topic Issue, to this intensely researched theme—the tragedy and failure of the Yugoslav experiment?

The simple reply: because there remains much to mine from this political disaster-turned-war at the very doorstep of Central Europe. The real *raison d'être*, however, is more complex. Heretofore, scholars have concentrated on the traditional twin dimensions: the "why?" and the "how?" Approaching Yugoslavia's death from these two perspectives is both logical and professionally correct. Yet, there is a third dimension that may sharpen the methodological approach and considerably expand the horizons of one's understanding. In this case the question, raised here, is based on the possibility and probability of options: *did events have to travel the route they took?*

Did the unraveling of Yugoslavia have to take place? Were there pivotal moments when other critical decisions could have been made? Were there individuals who

could have altered the course of events? Could the Yugoslav crisis have been averted or, at least, moderated to head-off the death of federal unity? If so, when was there still time for maneuvering towards a peaceful reconciliation? And, at what point was it too late? When was the sequence of events, if ever, written in stone? Furthermore, was genocidal violence in the Bosnian civil war avertable? If not, then why? If yes, who had such power?

This approach, pioneered by the guest editor, Professor Aleksandar Pavković, has allowed a dozen contributing authors to review the distant and recent past in an imaginative and creative light. By looking at the background of Yugoslavia's socio-political pathologies from the perspective of room to modify decisions, by searching for viable alternatives, each author has provided a sense of the overall flexibility of human events, solidly rooting them in the enlightened context of history-as-choice. There is here a conscious attempt to look for a measure of free-will where there might seem to be less than very little. Unfortunately, as most authors conclude, the opportunities to embark in other directions did exist, but, all too often, the political will was lacking. The death of Yugoslavia, according to these researchers, was, perhaps, far from inevitable—certainly not accidental or pre-ordained—but, in the end, it was consciously willed by those with the power to embrace less radical directions and employ more moderate means.

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