

BOOKS

Neighbors at War: Anthropological Perspectives on Yugoslav Ethnicity, Culture, and History,

Edited by Joel M. Halpern and David A. Kideckel

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Joel M. Halpern and David A. Kideckel (eds): *Neighbors at War: Anthropological Perspectives on Yugoslav Ethnicity, Culture, and History*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. 477 pp.

For more than a decade journalists, politicians, scholars and the man in the street have struggled to make sense of the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. How could this happen in Europe, toward the end of the 20th century? Ethnographic fieldwork encounters with informants in Bosnia and Herzegovina have taught me that many locals, in spite of hardline nationalists' efforts to provide easy explanations to this question, share the same feeling of fundamental bewilderment expressed in the west: What had happened to their ex-country, their local communities and their life projects?

Neighbors at War starts out by defining the aim of the book in similar terms, as an effort to "understand the war in former Yugoslavia and, most particularly, its violent nationalisms", albeit from "alternative perspectives" (p. 3). Addressing a research question of such breadth and magnitude, and containing over 22 contributions, *Neighbors at War* is a rather fragmented read with regard to focus, methodology and quality. Thus, the contributing scholars cover most of the territories of the former Yugoslavia. In addition, a couple of chapters report on refugee populations further afield. Edited by American anthropologists Joel Halpern and David Kideckel, most of the volume's authors are also trained within anthropology, while others represent the disciplines of demography, law, history, ethnomusicology, psychiatry and international relations. It should be noted that the majority of the chapters are revised versions of essays that appeared in the 1993 special issue of *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, entitled "War among the Yugoslavs". *Neighbors at War* differs from "War among the Yugoslavs" in that some new chapters have been added, while a few of the original contributors decided against updating their articles for this volume.

Given this level of fragmentation it is hard to comment on the book in general terms. A few themes run through a number of chapters, though. First of all, attitudes differ markedly on the issue of the level of objectivity/subjectivity demanded by social scientists doing research on a phenomenon as politically and morally contested as the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, this diversity has been deliberately sought out and encouraged by the editors. Positions range from contributors such as Hammel, whose purpose is to provide "a reliable and objective account of events" (p. 19), to other contributors like Muršić who argues that in the context of war avoiding "moral issues borders on the hypocritical" (p. 57). Of course, this is not the place to offer final judgement on this issue, but still one may wonder why several of the contributing scholars take objectivity and morality to be absolute opposites. In the view of this reviewer, the most powerful type of scholarship is the one that depicts, as objectively as possible, socio-cultural developments from the point of view of differently positioned local actors, leaving it to readers to draw their moral conclusions from the analyses. Far too much scholarship on the former Yugoslavia is preoccupied with, if not directly motivated by, putting the blame on one or the other side of the conflict. In relation to a phenomenon as complex as the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, searching for the 'roots' of the conflict, as if a 'pure' starting point can somehow be distilled, is bound to look partisan or biased.

A second theme of significant disagreement concerns the capability of fieldwork-based studies to make state-wide generalizations. This issue is brought out most clearly in the chapter by Slovene anthropologist Rajko Muršić. Muršić criticizes the efforts by anthropologists and other locally based social scientists to explain the Yugoslav wars in general terms and for being less than convincing, including many of the articles in the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* edition which preceded the current volume in his criticism: "If an anthropologist discusses former Yugoslavia on the basis of fieldwork experience and knowledge, that person can still not understand events at the state level. Such generalizations are more complex" (p. 74). Although anthropologists are not always content with their village studies, and with due caution can offer valuable insights into wider regional phenomena, Muršić's point is well taken, at least in relation to the literature on the former Yugoslavia. Thus, the chapters dealing with history, ethnicity and nationalism on an overall level of the conflict, primarily in the first two parts of *Neighbors at War*, more or less fail in their endeavour. At best, they add no new vital information to the by now impressive number of studies on the course of the conflict; instead they deepen, through the almost ritual reiteration of the region's dramatic history, the image of a historical determinism whereby the former Yugoslavia is considered, more or less explicitly, as a doomed project from its very inception. At worst,

they draw problematic or misleading conclusions on the basis of their material. Simic, for example, considers nationalism to be a "folk ideology" and 'explains' the brutality of the war as caused by "the ethos of revenge and warfare" (p. 114) that apparently (still) characterizes this part of the world. In a similar way, Denich argues that people "uncritically followed their 'own' nationalists" (p. 54), yet without qualifying this lack of critical distance to the political leaders. Indeed, the relationship between, on the one hand, political events and developments and, on the other hand, attitudes and currents among 'ordinary' people, is still surprisingly unexplored. Unfortunately, even Muršić cannot resist trying to explain the Yugoslav conflict in the crudest of terms. The enthusiastic celebration of Croatian independence by Despalatovic stands outside assessment.

By contrast, those chapters that stick to perhaps less ambitious but all the more so practice oriented studies of the local dynamics or particular socio-cultural aspects of the conflict, succeed in adding refreshing perspectives and new knowledge to the ever-expanding body of literature on the bloody collapse of the former Yugoslavia. For example, Bax explores the 'little war' between different clans in the Bosnian town of Medjugorje, a recent Catholic pilgrimage center, within the larger context of war. Likewise, Bennett considers the repercussions of war in a Croatian island village far away from the frontlines but still, as he shows, through locals' vandalism against Serbian-owned summer homes and the impact of the influx of refugees, it is affected by more distant events. Maners investigates the rise and fall of ethnic nationalism in Sarajevo through the prism of the Yugoslav institution of folklore societies. Although somewhat essentializing, psychologist Weine's chapter contains useful reflections on the post-war cultural capital of the Bosnian Muslim term *merhamet* (meaning 'compassion', 'forgiveness' and 'beneficence'). The Dayton Peace Accords, which formally ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are subjected to careful legal and historical analysis in the contribution by Mertus, who sees the peace agreement as cementing the principle of ethnic separation and points out distressing parallels to the status of national minorities in Europe during the interwar period. Of particular interest are those chapters by Jovanovic, exploring the war through the production of political cartoons, and by Laušević, who shows the power of rock videos to forge group identity during the Bosnian war. All of these exploratory chapters, while overtly attempting to shy away from explicitly taking sides, are not examples of 'value-free science', but of valuable science.

Neighbors at War, then, is a well-intentioned publication that contains a number of empirically strong and original analyses of particular aspects of the wars in the former Yugoslavia that when put together, shed light on the larger picture. It does not explain the war as such because such is a monstrous task.

Thus, for scholars as well as for people in and from the former Yugoslavia, the question remains: How could this happen? Perhaps we will never know for sure.

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Banal Nationalism

By Michael Billig, London, New Delhi, and Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1995. 177 pp.

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It is probably not too reductive to say that the premise underlying Billig's book is that nationalism has traditionally been conceived of as an unattractive and extreme characteristic found on the periphery of society. It is not for, or of, *us* (us being the inhabitants of the *established* Western nations). This, however, would ignore the skill and subtlety with which Billig builds and presents his arguments with regard to what he terms *banal* nationalism.

Billig founds his argument on an analysis of nationalism, which is based on a concept of the nation as a modern construct, as in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. From this theoretical base Billig asserts that nationalism can be seen as an ideology, one that holds together the world of nation-states by presupposing the naturalised inevitability of the nation. His examination of the historical development of the concept "nation" highlights the lack of any one identifiable indicator, such as language, geography, or religion, which could be used to theorise the concept of nation.

His analysis of the nation is followed by an analysis of nationalism. He argues that studies of nationalism are often flawed; on the one hand, historians have ignored much of the past in the creation of nations, while on the other hand, social scientists have adopted the conventional standpoint where nationalism is "typically seen as the force which creates nation-states or which threatens the stability of nation-states" (p. 43). As an example of this latter view, Billig challenges Giddens' assertion that nationalism develops when ordinary life is threatened or disrupted. This view, Billig maintains, comes from and solidifies the idea that the "established" nations do not participate in nationalistic behaviour; for "us" there is patriotism. Where the "nationalism" of *others* is "hot," irrational, and dangerous, "our patriotism" is controlled, dignified, and benign.