

III

REVIEW ESSAY

KRITIČKI OSVRT

Lyal S. Sunga

NOAM CHOMSKY, *YUGOSLAVIA: PEACE, WAR AND DISSOLUTION*, DAVOR DŽALTO (ED.), PM PRESS, OAKLAND, 2018.

ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author reviews and critically assesses the book *Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution*, authored by Noam Chomsky and edited by Davor Džalto. The author also points to the importance and value of the book for the field of political theory, international relations and Yugoslav studies, examining at the same time particular concepts (such as “genocide”) within the broader context of legal theory and international law.

KEYWORDS

Yugoslavia, war, breakup, Chomsky, genocide

Part I: Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia’s historical transitions through peace, war and dissolution register both some of humanity’s greatest dreams and worst nightmares. During the Cold War, Yugoslavia’s experiments with self-determination, socialist self-management and strategic non-alignment, stirred hearts and dreams far beyond the Balkans for the revolutionary empowerment of the masses. Tito’s death in 1980 released his iron grip over the multi-ethnic Yugoslav federation, and it was not long before extremist ethnic nationalism and genocidal massacre tragically filled the power vacuum, shredding Yugoslavian sovereignty along the way. Revisiting tumultuous modern Yugoslavian history through Chomsky’s critical eyes adds valuable perspective to current crises in ethnic identity, nationalism, self-determination, human rights, and the proper role of the constitutional State in their new guises in the Balkans and beyond.

Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution brings together Noam Chomsky’s reflections in letters, newspaper editorials, interviews and commentaries published over four decades. This book will captivate not only students of the Yugoslav socialist experiment, but also anyone concerned with superpower swagger, the *fata morgana* of Non-Alignment, the truth or falsity of political and military narratives on the Yugoslav conflict, and whether anarchism offers us anything constructive today. To understand today’s governance challenges in the face of resurgent nationalism, racism and xenophobia, corrupt oligarchic rule, obscene concentration of wealth at the top percentile, the spread of extreme poverty

even in rich countries, and widespread loss of faith in democracy around the globe, it is worth exploring Chomsky's unremittingly searing criticism of the foreign policy of the United States – currently the world's only superpower.

The book is introduced and edited by Professor Davor Džalto. Andrej Grubačić's preface provides a heartfelt "glimpse of the interior life of former Yugoslavia from the perspective of a Yugoslav, of a Yugoslav exile" (p. viii). Grubačić relates his grandfather's role as last secretary of the Communist Youth movement, an Ambassador to the Non-Aligned Movement, President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Bosnia and other key roles as well as his grandmother's influence, and conflicted loyalties within the family towards Bolshevism, independent Yugoslav socialism and anarchism, and the prospects for a new trans-ethnic Yugoslav federation of the future. He concludes that "Socialist Yugoslavia may have been consigned to a museum, but the memory of the Yugoslav political project endures, as do our memories of the antifascist struggle, the heroism of Gavrilo Princip and Young Bosnians, and the tradition of multi-ethnic coexistence. Another Yugoslavia, in some different, and hopefully more developed form, is inevitable. I am sure of it." (p. xvi). Bosnian Serb Princip, one should recall, is widely reviled outside Serbian circles for having assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and the Archduke's beloved wife Sophie, in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, an event that led to the outbreak of the First World War, anywhere between 15 and 19 million deaths, and an estimated 23 million military wounded. Grubačić's heroism comment alerts the reader straightaway to expect to encounter alternatives to predominant narratives, and to be challenged to revisit settled truths.

Davor Džalto's introductions both to the whole book and to each of the three main parts of the book, make indispensable reading. They set the historical, political and social context for understanding better the contemporaneous import of Chomsky's intellectual interventions on Yugoslavia as well as their wider ideological implications. Džalto's clear, precise and detailed appreciation of Yugoslav dynamics through peace, war and dissolution, helps readers connect Chomsky's keen insights of years ago to current debates. In "Yugoslavia: Dreams and Realities," Džalto reminds us of the formation of the "first" Yugoslavia from the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians following World War I and the independent kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro at the demise of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the complexities surrounding the formation of the "second" Yugoslavia, rooted in World War II. He recalls Hitler's invasion of 6 April 1941 and the rival Četnik anti-fascist movement led by Colonel Dragoljub Mihailović, and Tito's communist partisans, including the distribution of Serb national power across the nascent Yugoslav republics (p. 7). Džalto then relates the formation of the Yugoslav constitution on 31 January 1946 from these portentous beginnings to the Yugoslav interpretation of the right to self-determination to apply to "constitutive nations" of the Yugoslav federation, to be distinguished from the rights of "national minorities" whose origins lay beyond the territorial frontiers of Yugoslavia, such as Albanians, Bulgarians, Hungarians and Romanians. Džalto paints the background panorama

of Tito's increasing authoritarianism, his punitive rejection of Milovan Djilas' social democratic critique of Yugoslav apparatchik bourgeoisification, Tito's split with Stalin in 1948, Tito's "anti-revolutionary" purges, Tito's oppression of dissidents that reached deep into Yugoslav intelligentsia and universities, and how Tito used Non-Alignment to bolster his personal prestige domestically and Yugoslavia's abroad.

Most edifying is Džalto's treatment of the Milovan Djilas and Edvard Kardelj notion of "self-managing socialism" that proposed transformation of the inefficient, and manifestly politically repressive Soviet planned economy model, including forced agricultural collectivization policy in Yugoslavia, with an enlightened socioeconomic configuration based on the free association of direct producers. These producers would be entrusted with the power to make decisions regarding production and distribution, breaking the stifling production monopoly of party and bureaucracy. Workers' councils would be abolished in favour of the free association of producers as Karl Marx envisioned in *Das Kapital* and in one master stroke, could, argued Djilas, inaugurate the "beginnings of democracy, something that socialism had not yet achieved; further, it could be plainly seen by the world and the international workers' movement as a radical departure from Stalinism" (Džalto, quoting Djilas at p. 24). The new model, which Tito embraced and formalized in the Workers' Self-Management Act, adopted by the Yugoslavian National Assembly on 26 June 1950, helped Yugoslavia chart a "Third Way" independent of the Soviet Union whose behemoth socialist State contrasted starkly with Marx's vision of the eventual withering away of the State and a classless society. Not surprisingly, this new Third Way model elicited hostile reaction from Stalin who ruled the USSR with secret police terror and purges to quash any and all form of political dissent. What would Russia, and the world, have looked like today if Lenin's Vanguardism had not emerged supreme over Socialist Revolutionaries, Socialist Internationalists or other radical left splinter groups active in 1917?

The book's chapter on "Conscience of Yugoslavia" (p. 35) is Chomsky's letter to the editors of the *New York Review of Books*, dated 7 January 1971. It draws attention to the plight of a philosophy student at Belgrade University, sentenced to 22 months in prison for having organized demonstrations and having protested against the US invasion of Cambodia and whom Chomsky calls the "conscience of Yugoslavia." A few years later, Chomsky and Robert S. Cohen co-wrote another letter to the editor of the same journal, opposing repression at Belgrade University. What is interesting about these letters is that not only did Chomsky speak out against this kind of repression, but that he carefully traced the chronological developments of student thought and activism as a function of the emerging social and economic conditions of the time. He then related these debates to the politically sensitive governance paradigms of "self-management," and more significantly, even to the internecine struggles within the Yugoslav Communist Party itself.

Why should Chomsky and Cohen have bothered themselves with what could be considered an isolated University regulatory dispute in a faraway

land? The answer goes to the heart of Chomsky's relevance as thinker and activist. Chomsky recognized, as few seem to have appreciated as fully as he did at the time, the importance of academic freedom in the University, of freedom of thought in society in general, and its intimate connection with participatory democracy free from authoritarian domination. Quite remarkably, Chomsky delves into the details of university norms and regulations which were the actual determinants of the degree of academic freedom of thought at Belgrade University. Chomsky's approach helped mobilize international opinion, for example, in Scandinavian countries, which applied "friendly pressure" on the Government not to continue its repressive measures against the Faculty of Philosophy, and in particular, to refrain from imposing requirements in June 1973 upon university professors to accept Marxism. Chomsky and Cohen saw that: "The degree of pressure will depend on whether the whole thing will pass in silence as a little episode in one of the world's many universities, or whether it will be understood for what it is: one of the last battles for survival of free, critical, progressive thought in the present-day socialist world ..." We need only recall bullying tactics, repressive measures, and threats against professorial tenure and promotion in some prestigious American universities that surrendered to the barrage of post-9/11 US Government national security and counter-terrorism rhetoric to see the direct relevance of repression at Belgrade University in the 1970's, to academic conformism today, or further back in time, McCarthyist pressure on American professors to disown Marxist sympathies. Chomsky joined with other prominent intellectuals in an open letter to Marshall Tito objecting to a new law in Serbia instituting further repressive measures, and these intellectuals then formed a standing International Committee of Concern for Academic Freedom in Yugoslavia.

Part II: Yugoslav Wars

Professor Džalto prefaces Part II entitled "Yugoslav Wars" (p. 50) by recalling how armed conflict shattered confidence in the myth of the inevitability and invincibility of western liberal thought and practice as exemplified in Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. In concrete terms, Džalto identifies the influx of arms into Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia's internal security structure, and bleak economic conditions, as exacerbating factors for the onset of armed hostilities and the breakup of Yugoslavia. Džalto takes issue with the qualification of the Srebrenica massacre as "genocide" and sides with Chomsky's contention that the "massacre whatever its scale, can hardly be used as justification for NATO intervention." The obvious question here is "why not?" Even if we grant that humanitarian intervention, that is, the unilateral or joint use of armed force in the territory of a State to protect the territorial State's residents, has been misused often for self-interest, can we really hold that massacres, *whatever their scale*, cannot justify military intervention to halt them and prevent further atrocities? Of course, military action in principle should be used only on strictly lawful grounds, and preferably through the UN or regional collective

security frameworks, but these don't always work, or may be blocked by veto in the case of the Security Council, or general lack of political will. Do we really want to ignore atrocities - *whatever their scale* - if humanitarian intervention could put a stop to it? That sounds like a recipe for doing nothing at all – a recipe which has been tried already for Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and many other places, with quite tragic results.

In Džalto's interview of Chomsky, Chomsky says that a contributing factor of Yugoslav dissolution was the impact of neoliberal policies pushed by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and US Treasury Department, which pitted international capital through the international financial institutions and major banks, against the power of labour and socialist welfare States. The degree to which this factor played a role in Yugoslavia's dissolution is hard to determine, but Chomsky's wide-angle perspective certainly places the issue very forcefully into the context of broader international economic relations. Chomsky also raises the issue of Germany's swift recognition of Croatian sovereignty, which was quickly followed by US recognition of the Bosniaks, as impetus for the demise of Yugoslavia. Germany's premature recognition of Croatia without protection for the Serb minority almost guaranteed war, says Chomsky, and he links this precipitous action to German insistence on austerity measures during the Grexit Crisis as a form of Teutonic economic aggression over southern Europe - an interesting extrapolation that however sounds factually unsupportable.

Chomsky's discussion on Srebrenica (p. 74) over the course of several interviews tries to counter accusations from certain journalists and others that he never properly recognized the Srebrenica massacre as an act of genocide. Chomsky's Srebrenica arguments on genocide seem seriously flawed and they cry out for comment. Chomsky says:

I don't use the word 'genocide' much, and I don't think it's used properly. The way it's used strikes me as a kind of Holocaust denial. I mean, to use the term 'genocide' when you kill a bunch of people you don't like, that demeans the victims of the Holocaust. If you kill, say, a couple of thousand men in a village, after you have allowed the women and children to escape – you have in fact trucked them out – that does not count as genocide. It's a horror story but it is not genocide. ... In the case of Srebrenica, the figures are debated. The highest figures that are given are around eight thousand. However, when enemies carry out an atrocity there is a huge effort that goes into finding every piece of bone, into the DNA analysis, into trying to get the biggest number you can. When we carry out a comparable atrocity nobody even investigates it. I think we ought to tell the truth about it, and the truth is that it was an atrocity, but nothing like what was claimed in, say, the British press.

True, the term "genocide" must not be used lightly. True, not every atrocity counts as genocide. True, determining mass casualty figures is both an art and a science and almost always involves a certain level of imprecision. These questions aside, on what basis does Chomsky conclude (sounding rather definitive) that the Srebrenica massacre was *not* genocide?

The most authoritative definition of “genocide” comes from the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and its partial reproduction in Article 6 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which defines “genocide” as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The difference between “killing people you don’t like,” and “genocide” as legally defined is a big one, and it should not have escaped Chomsky’s critical eye. The key element in the international law definition of “genocide,” which is what Chomsky should have used to understand the Srebrenica massacre if he wanted to pronounce so definitively on it, has less to do with numbers of victims than with the intent of the perpetrator. The ICC Statute (and UN Genocide Convention adopted 50 years earlier) clearly establishes that the requisite mental element on the part of the perpetrator “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such,” together with one or more of the proscribed acts of genocide, are what qualifies an act as one of genocide. The legal definition of “genocide” represents objective consensus on the part of States about exactly what constitutes this crime and it should not be muddled up with less precise notions.

By all credible accounts, the Srebrenica massacre involved the premeditated and systematic killing of around 8000 Bosniak men and boys by Bosnian Serb forces between 11 and 22 July 1995. What made the Srebrenica massacre an act of genocide is that Mladic, Krstić and others, killed *all* males between 14 and 72 years of age *indiscriminately*, not during battle, not even as revenge, but instead as an attempt to wipe out the Muslim minority in a particularly historically symbolic and strategic territory. The crime of genocide simply does not require the perpetrators to kill or attempt to kill every single civilian, so Chomsky’s argument sounds very odd indeed, and his “killing people you don’t like” comment comes off as rather flippant.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia proved genocidal intent beyond a reasonable doubt with respect to the Srebrenica massacre in several very important cases. In the first ever conviction for genocide in Europe, Radislav Krstić, Bosnian Serb commander, subsequently Chief of Staff in the Republika Srpska Army, was given 35 years imprisonment for his role in the Srebrenica massacre. The ICTY Trial and Appeal Chambers found that genocidal intent was clearly shown by the Army of Republika Srpska’s

singling out of Bosnian Muslims - a distinct national group. The reasoning of the Trial Chamber was that:

The size of the Bosnian Muslim population in Srebrenica prior to its capture by the VRS [Army of Republika Srpska] forces in 1995 amounted to approximately forty thousand people. Although this population constituted only a small percentage of the overall Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time, the importance of the Muslim community of Srebrenica is not captured solely by its size. As the Trial Chamber explained, Srebrenica (and the surrounding Central Podrinje region) were of immense strategic importance to the Bosnian Serb leadership. Without Srebrenica, the ethnically Serb state of Republika Srpska they sought to create would remain divided into two disconnected parts, and its access to Serbia proper would be disrupted. The capture and ethnic purification of Srebrenica would therefore severely undermine the military efforts of the Bosnian Muslim state to ensure its viability, a consequence the Muslim leadership fully realized and strove to prevent. (See “Appeals Chamber Judgement in the Case The Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstić: The Appeals Chamber unanimously finds that Genocide was committed in Srebrenica in 1995,” available at http://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/acjug/en/040419_Krsti_summary_en.pdf).

In terms of evidence, the ICTY concluded genocidal intent from the fact that VRS forces intended to eliminate all Bosnian Muslims of all men of military age from Srebrenica. Krstić’s actions betrayed a clear intention to wipe out part of this group and that fact implicated him as commander directly in the genocide. Anyone can immerse themselves in the minutiae of the ICTY’s Srebrenica genocide or of the many other crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia, and the ICTY’s evidentiary findings, judgements and sentences simply by accessing the ICTY’s official website.

But here’s the point: the Krstić Appeal Judgement was rendered in 2004. That was almost a decade before Chomsky commented at the British Library in London on 19 March 2013 that the Srebrenica massacre *did not constitute genocide*. That makes Chomsky’s opinion seem not just poorly supported, but flat out wrong. Anyone doubting the unanimous judicial decision in Krstić could do just as well to read the ICTY’s trials and convictions of Ljubiša Beara, Bosnian Serb colonel for his role at Srebrenica (and also Žepa), former commander of Bratunac Brigade Vidoje Blagojević, former Bosnian Serb police official Ljubomir Borovčanin, soldier Dražen Erdemović, Bosnian Serb military assistant Milan Gvero, Dragan Jokić, Radivoje Miletić, Bosnian Serb army officer Drago Nikolić, Momir Nikolić, VRS lieutenant colonel Dragan Obrenović, VRS general Vinko Pandurević, and VRS army lieutenant Vujadin Popović. Although Chomsky is right to complain that when “we carry out a comparable atrocity nobody even investigates it,” it does not follow that no crimes of genocide should be prosecuted. It rather suggests that international criminal justice law should become more universal and more effective so that the rule of law can be administered as equally and fairly as possible and that all perpetrators should be prosecuted for crimes under international law regardless of nationality or ethnic or religious background.

Like any justice institution, the ICTY suffered from imperfections including some serious ones, but the ICTY did detail exhaustively the particular crimes of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the former Yugoslavia and it did succeed in convicting Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians, Macedonians and Montenegrins. This achievement might make future would-be war criminals think twice before committing such crimes. Unless one wants to adopt an extreme position that the ICTY comprising Prosecutors, Judges and staff from countries around the globe and established by the UN Security Council, was completely biased or that it was the manifestation of some dark international conspiracy, or worse, that no one should anywhere be prosecuted for crimes under international law, Chomsky's approach appears quite puzzling and perhaps morally untenable.

Part III: Kosovo Crisis

Professor Džalto helpfully details the demography of Kosovo and its pivotal political position within the former Yugoslavia (p. 78). As Džalto points out, humanitarian intervention was used to justify the bombing which commenced on 24 March on the rationale of armed hostilities that had escalated already in 1998 and Serb and Yugoslav rejection of the Contact Group's February 1999 Rambouillet and March 1999 Paris ultimata. NATO's "humanitarian" and "responsibility to protect" reasons for its attack were little more than pretexts, according to Džalto. Moreover, he contends, the bombing of Kosovo strengthened Milošević's hand by solidifying his support in response to an external threat, and this in turn dramatically escalated the violence, including Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) enforced disappearances, torture, incommunicado detention, and organ trafficking. Džalto's points invite readers to call into question dominant narratives around NATO's bombing campaign, and they also make one wonder why the ICTY did not prosecute anyone associated with it.

In his May 1999 piece for *Z magazine*, Chomsky laments the fact that Ibrahim Rugova's non-violent initiatives to secure the rights of Albanian Kosovars were side-lined and neglected by way of the US-led NATO bombing campaign. Chomsky offers alternatives to the mainstream narrative about the purported need of the bombing campaign to counter Serb atrocities in Kosovo (at p. 87). His challenge opens up space for critical revisitation of the facts - in itself very important. It must be said however that his argument jumps from the claim that Serbian police violations were really a response to earlier KLA provocations, which may be true, to reasoning by analogy from American responses to Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds and Madeleine Albright's cynical attitude towards President Suharto of Indonesia, but these examples don't necessarily shed light on the legality and legitimacy of NATO's Kosovo bombing itself. Chomsky is surely correct however to point out that humanitarian intervention has been misused repeatedly to cover the use of unauthorized military intervention for naked self-interest, and that proponents of humanitarian intervention seem to wallow in the swamps of double standards:

Consider, for example, Iranian offers to intervene in Bosnia to prevent massacres at a time when the West would not do so. These were dismissed with ridicule (in fact, generally ignored); if there was a reason beyond subordination to power, it was because Iranian good faith could not be assumed. A rational person then asks obvious questions: Is the Iranian record of intervention and terror worse than that of the U.S.? And other questions, for example: How should we assess the ‘good faith’ of the only country to have vetoed a Security Council resolution calling on all states to obey international law? What about its historical record? (p. 91).

Chomsky then goes on to recall condemnable US actions in Colombia, Turkey, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (p. 92), which add up to good rhetoric, but it does not help us assess the Kosovo bombing itself because these other examples of certainly reprehensible US action, were not necessarily reprehensible in the same way as the NATO bombing of Kosovo or for the same reasons.

That being said, Chomsky’s arguments successfully expose the incoherence of US foreign policy over decades; even if the arguments themselves lack precision or refinement, they do get to the core of the issue: US humanitarian policy is and always has been driven by economic and geo-strategic self-interest, as we have seen over and over again in countless instances around the globe. While there are many more technically precise and analytically more erudite works of other authors who analyze US imperialism and indeed imperialism generally, few come close to reaching the audience Chomsky has for decades with clear, simple, cogent language. Among Chomsky’s pieces on Kosovo, perhaps the clearest and most articulate version of his anti-intervention argument is titled “Lessons from Kosovo” (p. 126) and it is worth reading carefully. In it, he rails at the double standards the US so often has used to support “worthy” victims, while ignoring people in similar circumstances who should be equally morally deserving, such as Palestinian victims of Israeli occupation (p. 133). In “A Review of NATO’s War Over Kosovo,” Chomsky sets out interesting ways in which the crisis in Kosovo could have been handled other than NATO’s aerial bombing campaign (pp. 148–149).

Post 9/11 intellectual political discourse has come under renewed threat from national security rhetoric which the US has promoted around the globe, and the space for critical thinking has been further weakened by professorial and media self-censorship. The toxic mix of US exceptionalism, xenophobic paranoia, and deeply entrenched racism and intolerance persists alongside the US’s enduring predilection for military unilateralism and regime change against other countries. Chomsky’s relentless criticism of American economic predation at home and abroad and his provocative denunciations of official narratives that permeate American society as “Leader of the Free World” shows didactic genius. *Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution* is well worth reading as much for its insights on Yugoslavia as for its spirit of defending independent thought and free speech against the dominant discourse in today’s world.

References:

Noam Chomsky, *Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution*, Davor Džalto (ed.), Oakland: PM Press, 2018.

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, available at <https://www.icc-cpi.int/nr/rdonlyres/add16852-ae9-4757-abe7-9cdc7cf02886/283503/romestatutengl.pdf>

Appeals Chamber Judgment in the Case of the Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstić, available at http://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/acjug/en/040419_Krsti_summary_en.pdf

Lajal S. Sanga

Apstrakt

U ovom prilogu autor daje prikaz i kritički osvrt na knjigu *Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution* Noama Čomskog, koju je priredio Davor Džalto. Autor takođe ističe značaj knjige za sfere političke teorije, međunarodnih odnosa i jugoslovenskih studija, pri čemu kritički ispituje pojedinačne koncepte (poput „genocida“) u sklopu šireg okvira pravne teorije i međunarodnog prava.

Ključne reči: Jugoslavija, rat, raspad, Čomski, genocid