

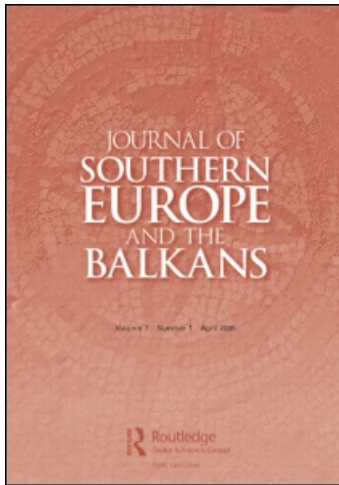
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On: 1 September 2008

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 795060867]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713435906>

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Online Publication Date: 01 August 2008

To cite this Article Djilas, Aleksa(2008)'Response to Sabrina P. Ramet and John R. Lampe, 'Debates', JSEB, Vol. 10, No. 1, April 2008, in relation to Aleksa Djilas' review article 'The Academic West and the Balkan Test', published in JSEB, Vol. 9, No. 3, December 2007',Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans,10:2,243 — 248

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14613190802219013

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14613190802219013>

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DEBATES

Response to Sabrina P. Ramet and John R. Lampe, 'Debates', *JSEB*, Vol. 10, No. 1, April 2008, in relation to Aleksa Djilas' review article 'The Academic West and the Balkan Test', published in *JSEB*, Vol. 9, No. 3, December 2007

ALEKSA DJILAS

Prime Minister Winston Churchill: 'Who is this Damaskinos? Is he a man of God, or a scheming prelate more interested in the combinations of temporal power than in the life hereafter?'

Lieutenant-General Ronald Scobie: 'I think the latter, Prime Minister.'

Churchill: 'Good, that's our man.'

(The quotations are from an unpublished dispatch filed by *Time Magazine's* correspondent from Athens in December 1944—Proceedings of the International Churchill Societies 1994–95, < <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=625> > (March 2008))

Professor Sabrina P. Ramet complains that I have 'dismissed out of hand' her book *Thinking About Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates About the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*. Yet, curiously, her reply is longer than that part of my review essay 'The Academic West and the Balkan Test' in which I deal solely with her work.

My starting point in rejecting *Thinking About Yugoslavia* owed much to the critical views of America's leading historical sociologist Michael Mann, which I considered applicable to Ramet's book. Central was Mann's insight: scholars who see the nation as a singular actor are themselves thinking like nationalists. Ramet, however, now claims that she agrees 'wholeheartedly' with Mann when he 'rejects any attempt to chastise entire ethnic groups as perpetrators of expulsions and genocide' (Ramet's quote from my review essay). After supposedly establishing that this is not what she had done with the Serbs, Ramet delivers a harsh verdict: '... Djilas is guilty of false attribution, attributing to me the accounts and views of others, which I merely report'.

But does she, in fact, 'merely report' those numerous extremist narrations, descriptions and opinions? Are her own thoughts and beliefs different? I think not. Allow me a brief summary of what I have shown in my review essay. When Ramet informs us about various all-encompassing and unqualified attacks on

Serbian politics and history, art and culture, religion and mentality, she does so extensively and often with obvious approval—indeed with what appears to be absolute glee. At the same time, hardly ever does she mention contrary evidence despite such evidence being readily accessible in countless books about the disintegration of Yugoslavia and about Balkan, Yugoslav and Serbian history. Nor does she offer any detailed or thorough criticism of the politics of other national groups of Yugoslavia, and almost none of their history, culture and the like, all the while viciously attacking scholarly books which attempt to provide a complex picture of the Yugoslav tragedy and accusing their authors of moral relativism.

After claiming to be a neutral reporter, Ramet suddenly changes her line of defence—perhaps I should say of attack?—asserting that she simply stated her preferences without wishing to impose them on the reader: ‘... I offered, at the end of my volume, a list of “personal favourites” and did not suggest that these were objectively the best volumes’. But this exactly is what she suggested. There is nothing personal in attributes such as brilliant, classic, invaluable, and she lavishes extravagant praise on these books and their authors throughout *Thinking About Yugoslavia*, not only at the end of it.

Professor Ramet’s methodology can be characterized as simultaneously superficial and extremist, a combination manifest in her reply to my review. For example, she quotes approvingly a 2005 report by Washington’s Heritage Foundation: ‘Serbia’s power structure remains in the grip of ... war criminals, corrupt security chiefs and ultra-nationalist politicians.’ But before agreeing with such blanket condemnation, should Ramet not explore what different analysts have said about the report, as well as comparing it with reports on Serbia from other institutions? And what about consulting, for the sake of comparison, reports dealing with other countries and provinces in the region, say with Kosovo, which is indeed led by corrupt war criminals and ultra-nationalists such as Hashim Thaçi, Agim Çeku and Ramush Haradinaj? Finally, why does Ramet, who claims to be a liberal and an internationalist, place so much trust in the Heritage Foundation? After all, this very conservative institution is primarily interested in defending and promoting American interests abroad, fully supports America’s claim to global leadership and regularly opposes international institutions, especially the United Nations.

In my review I expressed the opinion that whoever disagrees with Sabrina Ramet ‘is not entitled to the least respect’. Therefore, no surprise that I now suffer the same fate. After the above quote from the Heritage Foundation report, Ramet has added: ‘—perhaps Djilas’s formula for “legitimate” government, but not mine’. And, predictably: ‘If Djilas approved of Milošević’s expansionist project, surely that means that Djilas turned a blind eye to the harm it did to the people of the region, both Serbs and non-Serbs.’

Apparently it slipped her mind that on page 14 of her book she calls me ‘the internationally regarded Serbian writer’ (I would prefer Yugoslav but that is another matter), and that many people know me exactly because of my criticism of Milošević’s policies in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. In addition, she fails to remember that in her book *The Three Yugoslavias: State Building and Legitimation, 1918–2005* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, DC, 2006), in the Selected Bibliography, she lists my essay ‘A Profile of Slobodan Milošević’ (*Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993) which has

section titles such as 'Banality Triumphant', 'The Politics of Fear' and 'The Style of a Conspirator'.

Not content with attacking both my review and me personally, Professor Sabrina Ramet proceeds to write her own review:

I should like to say what is in my book ... and a little more about how it came about ... my original ambition ... as A. J. P. Taylor did with his own reviews ... book begins by setting ... which I define in the book as ... why I am troubled by

In my review, I speculated that Ramet might have written parts of *Thinking About Yugoslavia* after only reading other reviews. I then quipped that in the near future there may be a New York or London *Review of Reviews of Books*. Now I suspect that we may soon get a magazine in which authors review their own books.

Professor John R. Lampe's reply to my review of his *Balkans into Southeastern Europe: A Century of War and Transition* once again demonstrates his careful scholarship and good intentions towards the region he studies. I am also grateful for his courteous tone, worthy of a former diplomat (of the old school, let me make it clear, not of the modern backed-by-force kind). However, in my response I have decided not to discuss most of his arguments, highly relevant though they are, and instead to concentrate on defending in some detail what is my only serious reproach to his book—his reluctance to criticize US policies in the Balkans.

I do think (and have said it many times) that the primary responsibility for the wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration lies with Serbian, Croatian, Muslim, Albanian, etc. politicians and military leaders. Nevertheless, many of the US policies in the Balkans were profoundly wrong and continue to be so. And America's conduct in many other parts of the world deserves (and often receives) similar criticism. Because of the economic and military power of the USA, and perhaps equally importantly because of its enormous political and cultural influence, the creation of an American foreign policy that is principled and truly democratic is one of the most important tasks for the beginning of the 21st century. And who but American scholars should lead in these efforts?

In my review I have found John Lampe's account of the role of the USA in post-war Greece seriously flawed. He considers my criticism questionable and unpersuasive and claims that since the late 1950s America 'strongly supported the open, multi-party elections that became a cornerstone of democratic Greece, a cornerstone whose removal by the brief Colonels' régime of 1967–74 never won US approval'.

I am tempted to think that Lampe and I read different historians but the bibliography at the end of his book tells me that this is not so. For example, the British professor of Balkan history Richard Clogg is an authority for me but Lampe also often mentions his reliable and balanced books. It is from Clogg's *A Short History of Modern Greece* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980) that I learn how Americans supported Winston Churchill when he put pressure (following the dialogue I used above as a motto) on the unpopular King of Greece to appoint Archbishop Damaskinos of Athens as regent. And how in March 1952

the American ambassador threatened to reduce the aid sorely needed by Greece if the electoral system was not changed to favour the pro-American General Papagos.

Professor Clogg further tells us how the officers who carried out the *coup d'état* of 21 April 1967 used the plan NATO had elaborated for the suppression of possible massive riots. (The American-led military alliance had named it 'Prometheus', making plain that it used propagandistic misnomers even for its secret documents.) Soon political parties were banned, the right to strike abolished, thousands of people suspected of left-wing views arrested and in general a dictatorship established. The three officers' junta claimed to have prevented a communist revolution but produced no evidence that there had been such a threat.

Further still, since the 'Colonels' kept Greece firmly inside NATO, the USA made certain that their regime 'came under no real pressure from her NATO allies, beyond the expression of pious hopes for an eventual return to democratic rule' (p. 192). In general, America afforded the junta 'a very considerable degree of aid and comfort' (p. 193) and President Nixon sent it warm greetings. Finally and possibly most revealingly, the American-Greek relations actually deteriorated with the return of democracy in 1974 and Prime Minister Constantine Karamanlis at one point recalled his ambassador from Washington. The most important consequence of three decades of selfish and unprincipled US policies was the spread of irrational anti-Americanism throughout Greek society, but they also brought about a wide acceptance of utopian leftist ideas and an increase in uncritical support for liberation movements combating imperialism in different parts of the world.

Professor Lampe places his hopes in 'the region's own younger scholars to take the lead back from "the academic West"'. So do I, and allow me to use this opportunity to congratulate them on a good start. But I doubt that there will ever be Greek historians, no matter how passionately revisionist, who will rehabilitate America's policies towards their country. Most recently, Despina Papadimitriou, Assistant Professor of History at Panteion University, Athens, tells us in her 'George Papadopoulos and the Dictatorship of the Colonels, 1967-1974' (in Bernd J. Fisher, ed., *Balkan Strongmen: Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of Southeast Europe*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN, 2007, pp. 393-424), how in 1968, the US ambassador in Athens 'favored the government of George Papadopoulos', one of the three Colonels, and that the government 'succeeded in gaining U.S. recognition' (p. 409). Papadimitriou emphasizes a significant and sad phenomenon—'acceptance of the dictatorship by a substantial section of the Greek-American communities' (p. 414).

In his reply to my criticism of the American policy towards Yugoslavia, Lampe writes that the USA 'never went as far as calling Tito "a symbol of freedom"'. I am generally confident of my memory when it comes to outrageous and ludicrous statements by politicians—past and present, ours and foreign. Nevertheless, I must concede that I am less than certain that President Jimmy Carter did call Tito a symbol (or was it perhaps a hero?) of freedom, as I remember him doing. It is not difficult, nonetheless, to find statements by American presidents about Yugoslavia's communist dictator which are only slightly less laughably absurd and deficient in good taste.

Here are some examples from the American Presidency Project at the University of California at Santa Barbara (< <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu> >). President Richard Nixon greeted Tito as 'a world statesman of the first rank' ('Remarks of Welcome to President Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia', 28 October 1971), while President Gerald Ford told the Yugoslav leader that he was 'truly respected in America and throughout the world as one of the great men of the postwar era' ('Remarks on Arrival at Belgrade, Yugoslavia', 3 August 1975) and praised his 'wisdom' ('Toasts of the President and President Tito of Yugoslavia at a Working Luncheon in Belgrade', 4 August 1975).

President Jimmy Carter declared that 'the people of the United States are honored by the presence of a great world leader' whom he respected and admired, 'a friend and associate' of Churchill, Roosevelt and de Gaulle—actually, Tito had never met either Roosevelt or de Gaulle—the leader of a modern, prosperous country, 'a friend of the United States' ('Visit of President Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony', 7 March 1978). When Tito died, Carter asserted that 'Tito was a towering figure on the world stage' ('Josip Broz Tito Statement on the Death of the President of Yugoslavia', 4 May 1980). In the same statement Carter also said: 'For more than three decades, under administrations of both parties, it has been the policy of the United States to support the independence, territorial integrity, and unity of Yugoslavia.' As soon as the cold war ended, these frequently proclaimed principles were abandoned. Oh well.

May I add that when he visited Yugoslavia, President Carter went as far as to extol Tito as 'a great man, one of the greatest of the 20th century' ('Yugoslavia: Arrival in Belgrade Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony at Surcin Airport', 24 June 1980) and reaffirmed America's adherence to the principle of '... noninterference in the affairs of other nations'. Oh well again.

In his defence of American policy towards Yugoslavia and of his account of it, Lampe also writes: 'And in Tito's Yugoslavia, I point to considerable American encouragement to market-oriented economists. They became the only effective dissidents, in contrast to the fuzzy "socialist humanism" of the *Praxis* group.'

I am amazed how much I disagree with these two short sentences. I dispute the use of the term dissidents for economists, whatever their orientation, and insist that there were many dissidents outside the neo-Marxist *Praxis* group. And I particularly object to Lampe's reproach to dissidents on the grounds that they were not effective.

In communist Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia included, when dissidents engaged in intellectual and moral protest against oppression, they knew perfectly well that they could not achieve immediate and decisive results. But they hoped (often against hope) that in the long run their words and their sacrifices would call into question the legitimacy of the one-party regimes and encourage people to struggle for democratic reforms. Ultimately, they were proven right. While not a major force of political change, people like Russia's Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov, Poland's Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik, Czechoslovakia's Jan Patočka and Václav Havel, Yugoslavia's Milovan Djilas and Mihajlo Mihajlov, did contribute to ending one-party rule.

Only a few people in Eastern Europe were true dissidents. Those who dared to be critical, however, were not rare. In communist Yugoslavia, as Professor Lampe knows well, journalists and writers, philosophers and scholars, artists

and movie directors, were often victims of censorship (and, alas, of self-censorship too). Should the world's leading democracy not have supported, or encouraged, or at least acknowledged them?

I would add that it was also a mistake for the USA not to have had some kind of dialogue with nationalists, especially in Belgrade and Zagreb, since Serbian–Croatian relations were of central importance for the future of Yugoslavia. Would it not have been worth knowing what their complaints and demands were? Could they not have been influenced towards tolerance and moderation?

In an interview given to the Belgrade weekly *NIN* ('Prešli ste u viši razred', 5 June 2003, interviewer Ljiljana Smajlović), William D. Montgomery, US ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro, acknowledged that during the cold war, American administrations 'held their eyes closed' to Tito's authoritarian rule and the absence of free political expression in Yugoslavia. Montgomery then told of the visit to Belgrade in the 1970s by US Congressman Les Aspin whom it was his duty to accompany. (At that time, Montgomery was a young Foreign Service Officer in charge of economic–commercial affairs at the embassy.) Aspin requested to meet Milovan Djilas. Since Aspin was an important member of the House of Representatives (Montgomery might have mentioned that the congressman was also a well-known opponent of the American involvement in the Vietnam War) the embassy could not refuse his demand. But Montgomery was ordered not to enter Djilas' apartment and so stayed in the car during the visit. The embassy 'had very clear rules': no such contacts since 'Tito would get very angry'. To the interviewer's direct question if America had made a mistake not to have supported democratic forces in Yugoslavia, Montgomery replied: 'And I think that this was a very great mistake on the part of the United States.'

If an ambassador in a political interview had the courage to admit his country's past errors, then a leading historian in his scholarly book should definitely not have been so diplomatic when writing about them.

My personal recollections of the communist era and of the Belgrade dissidents and critical intellectuals, include only very few meetings with Western diplomats or visiting politicians. But I remember many long, intellectually stimulating and cordial conversations with journalists, professors and human rights activists, often from the USA. Perhaps I could be allowed slight romantic exaggeration and say that America the global empire was a friend of Tito and his regime, while America the free republic was ours.

Aleksa Djilas is a sociologist, historian and writer living in Belgrade, Serbia. Formerly a Research Fellow at Harvard University and a Public Policy Scholar at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, he is the author of, among other books, *The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution, 1919–1953*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991/1996, and, most recently, *Najteže pitanje. Eseji (The Hardest Question: Essays)*, Artist, Belgrade, 2005.