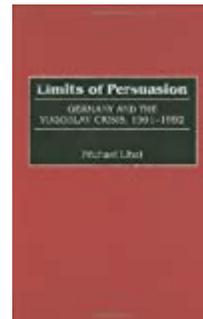


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Libal. *Limits of Persuasion: Germany and the Yugoslav Crisis, 1991-1992.* Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger, 1997. xi + 206 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95798-8.



Reviewed by Christian A. Nielsen (Columbia University)

Published on H-German (February, 1999)

Even as champagne corks popped to celebrate the unification of Germany in 1990, commentators throughout both Western and Eastern Europe worried aloud about the “new” Germany’s foreign policy. Historians, political scientists, and pundits in the media tried to prognosticate the effects unification would have on Germany’s relations with its neighbors, especially in East Central Europe and the Balkans, where a wave of revolutions reawakened old national disputes.

As Michael Libal, then the head of the Southeast European Department of the German Foreign Ministry, notes in *Limits of Persuasion*, it was in this supercharged atmosphere that Germany’s recognition of Croatian and Slovenian independence in December 1991 exploded onto the European diplomatic arena. Countless observers seized upon the German decision to grant international legal status to these two small former Yugoslav republics as a harbinger of a major shift in German foreign policy. Indeed, not a few European and U.S. diplomats and journalists saw the German decision as the first step down the path of a new *Sonderweg*. In Serbia, the state-controlled media whipped themselves into a frenzy over the alleged emergence of a “Fourth Reich” which sought to dismember Yugoslavia and to reestablish the fascist “Independent State of Croatia.”

Michael Libal takes it as his task to provide a detailed

account of German diplomacy in the period from May 1991 to the recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina in April 1992. Libal divides his book into three parts. He intends the first part of the book to be used as a primary source. The second part of the book stands as Libal’s personal attempt at scholarly analysis and as a bid to correct extant errors in the literature on the collapse of Yugoslavia.[1] In the final part of the book, Libal attempts to present some lessons from the diplomacy of 1991-1992. For his analysis, Libal notes that he takes “the Yugoslav perspective, in the sense that I have viewed German policies primarily as responses to the Yugoslav crisis as it unfolded” (p. 159).

According to Libal, the many observers who criticize German recognition policy ignore both Germany’s support for Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s and the context of Yugoslavia’s collapse. The long-standing German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, was in many ways Yugoslavia’s best diplomatic friend during the 1980s.[2] However, in 1991-1992, Genscher became the lightning rod for Serbian attacks on German diplomacy, and these left Genscher embittered. Intriguingly, Libal argues that the good bilateral relationship that Genscher had built with Yugoslavia actually caused Germany to underestimate the separatist rhetoric in Slovenia and Croatia in the late 1980s and early 1990s (p. 5).

Libal therefore dismisses the Serbian government's argument that Germany planned a conspiracy to dismember Yugoslavia, achieving through diplomacy what German military power failed to sustain during World War II.

After Croatia and Slovenia declared independence in June 1991, war erupted in Yugoslavia. Although Slovenia extricated itself rapidly from the escalating conflict, the vicious and prolonged attacks by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) on the towns of Osijek and Vukovar in the Eastern Slavonian region of Croatia caused a groundswell of outrage in German public opinion. Modern media beamed the first pictures of artillery shelling of towns and "ethnic cleansing" into the homes of Western Europe, and German reporters filed frequent reports about the mounting atrocities in Croatia. Libal points out that German public's indignity at the war in the former Yugoslavia provided powerful impetus for a shift in the German government's attitude towards the continued existence of Yugoslavia. Indeed, in September 1991, Genscher told the JNA that "the hour of recognition moved closer" every time a cannon or tank fired a shot into a civilian settlement (p. 45).

The impact of German public opinion on German policy formation is interesting, yet Libal fails to pursue its evolution. In this regard, the omission of any mention of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* editor Johann-Georg Reissmueller's one-man editorial crusade for recognition of Slovenia and Croatia is particularly odd. Although it is perhaps asking too much, more emphasis and explanation of the effect of the domestic political pressure on German policy-makers would have been useful. (Cynical observers might correctly note that the German government is perfectly capable of disregarding public opinion on foreign policy issues such as the introduction of a common European currency.) For example, Libal only briefly alludes to German annoyance with the rapidly growing influx of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. In my opinion, Libal also perhaps overly downplays the feeling of many Germans that Croats, and Slovenes should have a right to exercise self-determination just as the German people had done in 1989-1990.

Although Libal's narrative occasionally slips on small details, he correctly identifies the problematic role of self-determination and Yugoslavism in the crisis of 1991-1992. Libal describes how the President of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, disgraced the already battered image of Yugoslavism by using it as a cover for a policy which attempted to force the Yugoslav republics to be subjugated to a strong centralist government based in Belgrade. He

also correctly highlights the hypocrisy in Milosevic's periodic espousal of self-determination. Serb nationalists who trumpeted the right of all Serbs to reside in one state did not (and do not) extend the same right to Albanians. As Libal writes, "[t]he brutal repression of civil, human, and national rights in Kosovo [beginning in 1987] gave the other Yugoslav nations a hint of what might be in store for them once Serb nationalism had triumphed. This entailed, however, the risk for Serbia that at some time in the future its jealously guarded 'internal affairs' might become an object of federal concern or even intervention..." (p. 121).

Libal spends an understandably large portion of the book attacking the canard, repeated countless times by scholars and diplomats alike, that Germany forced the European Community (EC) to recognize Croatia and Slovenia without any regards for the subsequent consequences for security in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He provides a detailed account of the negotiations leading to the December 15, 1991 decision of the European Union to recognize Croatia and Slovenia on January 15, 1992. An arbitration commission was to deliberate on the eligibility of those Yugoslav republics applying for recognition of statehood.

Libal tries to address the criticism that the German decision on December 23, 1991 to accelerate recognition of Croatia and Slovenia left Germany open to accusations of betrayal by the other EC countries. In fact, it made it convenient for states like France and Britain, which had been uncomfortable with the decision in the first place, to accuse Germany of bullying the EC into recognition. Libal states that this came as a surprise to Genscher, who had received assurances that Germany's decision would not be regarded "as a violation of the consensus that had been reached" (p. 85). Yet the precocious German decision aggravated those who had hoped to see a truly common EC foreign policy emerge on the former Yugoslavia. Germany thus became a scapegoat despite the fact that other governments, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, were equally supportive of Croatian and Slovenian independence.

Germany was also criticized for ignoring substantial human rights abuses in Croatia and the absence of security guarantees for the Serb population of Croatia. Thus, the arbitration commission established by the EC recommended that the EC postpone recognition due to questionable protection for minority rights in Croatia. In this case, Libal argues plausibly that forcing Croatia to remain within a Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia would have

led to more human rights abuses than would recognition of Croatian independence. Nonetheless, it remains arguable that Germany and the other EC states could and should have been much more vigorous in their scrutiny of the Croatian government after recognition.

It is clear that Germany cannot be blamed for the outbreak of war in Croatia and Slovenia, as some of the more extreme critics of Germany have accused. After all, fighting erupted in June 1991, and Germany did not shift in favor of recognition until the late summer of that year. It is more difficult to dismiss the criticism that German recognition of Croatia aggravated the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Libal is effective here, noting that the President of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegovic, did not see German recognition policy as a danger to Bosnia-Herzegovina (p. 77). Moreover, it was the United States more than Germany which led the campaign to recognize Bosnia-Herzegovina in the spring of 1992. Libal rightly views German policy as a part of the general Western underestimation of the consequences of conflict in Croatia for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet Libal points with justifiable pride to Germany's generosity in accepting the burden of the refugees from the former Yugoslavia beginning in 1992.

To Libal, the only fault of Germany in 1991-1992 was to advocate forcefully the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia despite the full knowledge that it did not have the military and political latitude to bear the responsibilities and consequences which this would entail. "The essential flaw in German policy was of course that Germany herself could not really contribute to an implementation of the policies that logically flowed from her own attitude; namely, to the protection, by military means if necessary, of the smaller Yugoslav republics and nations against Serb aggression" (p. 163). Yet he argues that the only alternative to recognition would have been morally irresponsible, namely, to force Slovenia and Croatia to remain in a Yugoslavia dominated by Serb nationalist-communists.

On a general note, Part II of Libal's book tends to turn into a recycling of the arguments from Part I. Libal has read widely and does a strong, if polemical, job of confronting the major published accounts of Yugoslavia's collapse.[3] Yet to those readers who are already familiar with this literature, Libal's arguments will be predictable after reading the first part of his book. In addition, one cannot help but think that his exhaustive dismissals of the conspiracy theories surrounding German recognition of Slovenia and Croatia grant the more absurd of these

theories more than their fair "day in court." A good example of this tendency is Libal's chapter entitled "Shadows of the Past: Did Germany Re-enact History?"

In sum, Libal argues that "[a]t all times German behavior was perfectly legitimate and perfectly consonant with the principles and the practices of European Political Cooperation [sic], unless one wants to deny Germany the rights exercised by other member states..." (p. 150). Although one can disagree with Libal's assertion of perfect political synchronicity, his account underlines how hypersensitive other European countries were when Germany picked up the mantle of a fully sovereign foreign policy after 1989. In the end, one thing must stand clear: the most powerful force which contributed to the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia was the appalling behavior of the Serbian government, military, and paramilitary troops in the fighting in the autumn of 1991.

At the outset of his book, Libal notes that it is highly unusual for diplomats to write about such recent developments before retiring. He also states that his colleagues tried hard to dissuade him from writing the book. We must be thankful that Libal persisted in his effort. Other authors have provided more comprehensive narratives of the collapse of Yugoslavia, but Libal succeeds in adding another dimension to our understanding of European diplomatic reactions to Yugoslavia's collapse. Unfortunately, his monograph becomes overly repetitive and is too expensive for all but academic libraries.

Notes:

[1]. Space constraints prohibit an exhaustive listing of the works of the scholars and diplomats with whom Libal takes issue. The most prominent authors criticized by Libal include James Baker, Warren Christopher, David Owen, Hubert Vedrine, Susan Woodward, and Warren Zimmermann.

[2]. He has in fact provided his own account of German recognition policy in Hans Dietrich-Genscher, *Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1995). Intriguingly, the relevant chapter (pp. 927-968) is called "Krieg in Jugoslawien: Fuer eine europaeische Entscheidung."

[3]. For a briefer, but much more polemical rebuttal of the accusations against Germany in the case of the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia, see Daniele Conversi, "German-Bashing and the Breakup of Yugoslavia," *The Donald W. Treadgold Papers in Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies*, No. 16 (March 1998).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This

work may be copied for non-profit educational use if permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Christian A. Nielsen. Review of Libal, Michael, *Limits of Persuasion: Germany and the Yugoslav Crisis, 1991-1992*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2795>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.