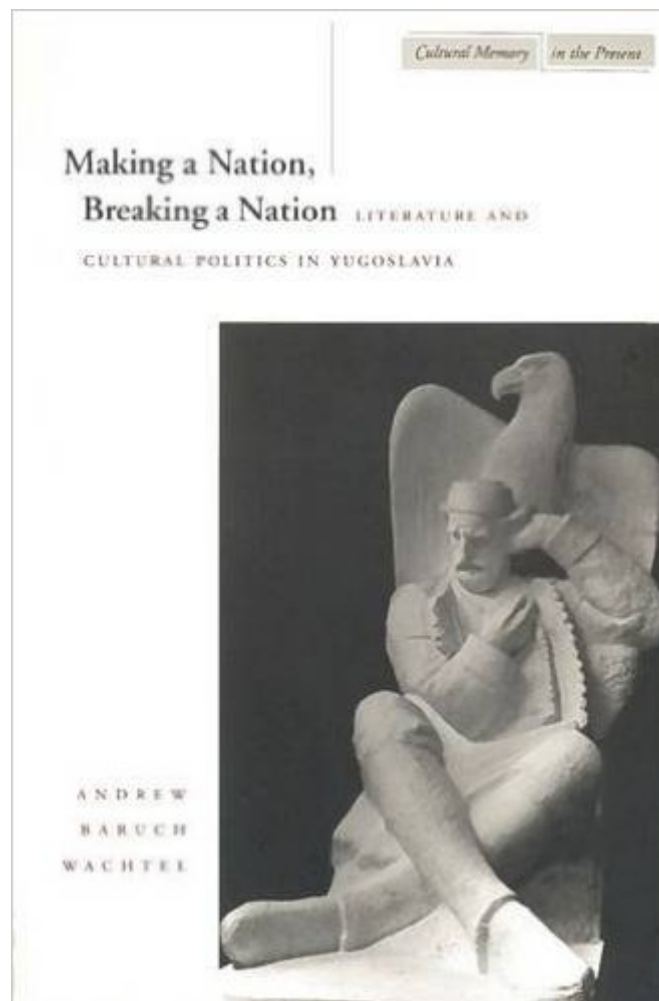


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Making A Nation, Breaking A Nation: Literature And Cultural Politics In Yugoslavia (Cultural Memory In The Present)



Synopsis

This book focuses on the cultural processes by which the idea of a Yugoslav nation was developed and on the reasons that this idea ultimately failed to bind the South Slavs into a viable nation and state. The author argues that the collapse of multinational Yugoslavia and the establishment of separate unination states did not result from the breakdown of the political or economic fabric of the Yugoslav state; rather, that breakdown itself sprang from the destruction of the concept of a Yugoslav nation. Had such a concept been retained, a collapse of political authority would have been followed by the eventual reconstitution of a Yugoslav state, as happened after World War II, rather than the creation of separate nation-states. Because the author emphasizes nation building rather than state building, the causes and evidence he cites for Yugoslavia's collapse differ markedly from those that have previously been put forward. He concentrates on culture and cultural politics in the South Slavic lands from the mid-nineteenth century to the present in order to delineate those ideological mechanisms that helped lay the foundation for the formation of a Yugoslav nation in the first place, sustained the nation during its approximately seventy-year existence, and led to its dissolution. The book describes the evolution of the idea of Yugoslav national unity in four major areas: linguistic policies geared to creating a shared national language, the promulgation of a Yugoslav literary and artistic canon, an educational policy that emphasized the teaching of literature and history in schools, and the production of new literary and artistic works incorporating a Yugoslav view. In the book's conclusion, the author discusses the relevance of the Yugoslav case for other parts of the world, considering whether the triumph of particularist nationalism is inevitable in multinational states.

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Customer Reviews

Wachtel's book represents an attempt to seek the causes for Yugoslavia's collapse over a decade ago in cultural factors. More specifically, he looks at the role literature and the fine arts (although the latter aspect receives much less attention; other forms of cultural creativity are basically ignored) played in both fomenting a common Yugoslav culture and undermining and eventually initiating the destruction of that very same culture. Along the way, Wachtel makes some valid observations and conclusions: early on, he takes issue with the 'historical inevitability' argument of Yugoslavia's break-up, pointing out that a study of the culture of any nation can produce arguments for 'inevitable' collapse. He cites the example of Germany, although the same applies to France, Italy, England, Spain and so on. Yet even in this initial section of the book, Wachtel's analysis is often marred by broad statements that are not sufficiently argued or backed by strong evidence. But the key flaw in this book is that it is yet another analysis based on a 'master variable' theory of Yugoslavia's collapse, i.e. culture, says Wachtel, is the key determinant. (Ironically, in the introduction he criticizes other scholars for making the same mistake, lambasting those who see the country's destruction as the result of exclusively political or economic factors.) Even if this thesis has merit, Wachtel's study is certainly insufficient to prove it one way or another. First, the focus on literature is too narrow, and second, even within this literary focus, the scope of research is again too narrow - he only covers a small handful of authors, and one can also question his reasons for choosing some and ignoring others.

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