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# The Balkans: Identities, Wars, Memories

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- Neven Andjelić, *Bosnia-Herzegovina. The End of a Tragedy* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 228 pp., \$34.95 (pb), ISBN 0-7146-8431-7.
- Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans after the Cold War. From Tyranny to Tragedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 256 pp., \$114.95 (hb), ISBN 0-415-27763-9.
- John Lampe and Mark Mazower, eds., *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 309 pp., \$23.95 (pb), ISBN 9639241822.
- James Pettifer, ed., *The New Macedonian Question* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave and St. Martin's Press, 1999), 311 pp., \$24.95 (pb), ISBN 0-333-92066-X.
- Michael Parenti, *To Kill a Nation. The Attack on Yugoslavia* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 246 pp., \$10.00 (pb), ISBN 1-85984-366-2.
- Maria Todorova, ed., *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (London: Hurst & Co., 2004), 374 pp., £17.50 (pb), ISBN 1-850-65715-7.

Emerging from the obscurity of old-fashioned, specialised 'area studies', since 1989 the Balkans have attracted much attention from historians. The primary reason for that has been, tragically, the war in Yugoslavia and the emergence of a postwar order. Even the post-communist transitions (in Romania, Bulgaria and Albania) attracted less attention. Nevertheless, the field benefited substantially from the increased interest in the area, and lively debates took place on contested issues, sparked not least by hasty initial schemata (and stigmata) used by outside observers, such as 'ancient hatreds' and the like. Parallel to the attention paid to what was going on in Yugoslavia, and perhaps more productively in the long run, was the postmodern, postcolonial approach to Balkan history, inspired by Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, which followed Edward Said's monumental *Orientalism* and appeared parallel to Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe*.<sup>1</sup> Such refreshing studies of Western representations of the region were later complemented by the internal perspective of how such representations were received, and coped with, in the region. A profusion of 'cultural studies' in the

<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

broadest sense followed, reflecting both the ongoing reshaping of Balkan identities and outside demand for such studies.

It has to be mentioned that much of the literature on the Balkans is now produced by scholars from the region, some living in Western countries, others in their native country, but mostly publishing in English or another international language (of course, the bulk of the literature has always been produced by 'native' scholars in languages of small circulation). At the same time, and more importantly, one can observe the breaking down of the parochialism of regional scholarship, as it turns to new topics and paradigms. A new generation of scholars (historians, literary scholars, sociologists and so on) has also introduced new critical perspectives. The cultural field has recently been especially vibrant and productive, dealing with such topics as national identities, memories and memorials, and history narratives and textbooks, together with an ongoing revision of the older historiographical tradition in every country of the region.

The volumes reviewed here are all contributions to the above-mentioned areas – nationalism and the wars on the one hand and cultural studies on the other. The books by Todorova, Lampe and Mazower, and, partly, Pettifer are edited volumes and deal with a cultural *problematique* (national identities, ideologies, memories, etc.), while the other volumes are single-authored and discuss the recent political history of the Balkans. They can therefore be neatly reviewed in two groups.

The volume edited by Maria Todorova arises from a conference held in 1999 on the Greek island of Halki. It concentrates on national memory (individual, communal, national) and national identities in the Balkans, as articulated in historical narratives (and oral histories), national heroes, monuments and celebrations, history textbooks and political discourses. The editor's introduction eloquently argues against any notions of unified or immutable Balkan essences, identities, mentalities or memories. Instead, she lays out her preferred conceptual approach (more appropriate than the concepts of boundaries or spaces) in terms of cultural legacies of a certain duration or continuity that on expiring turn into 'perception' and are used as a legitimising element in present-day social arrangements. The 'Balkans' themselves present, from this point of view, the Ottoman imperial legacy, in the same way as 'Eastern Europe' became a designation of the Communist, Soviet-dominated area; upon the demise of the Soviet Union it turned into a 'legacy' (and will at some future point remain as just a perception).

All seventeen contributions to this volume are very informative and some are even outstanding. Thoughtful and elaborate analyses of various memory- and identity-related topics, informed by leading scholarship (in some cases, though, with excessive theoretical zeal) remain true to their subject matter – in contrast to so many hastily and superficially written works about the Balkans. The volume represents Balkan scholarship at its finest, most unprejudiced and untraditional. To mention just a few contributions that show the range of topics: Milica Bakic-Hayden's essay depicts the Kosovo myth as a means of continuous self-interpretation by the Serbs; Maria Bucur studies war memorials in twentieth-century Romania; the ambivalent figure of a Macedonian hero (Boris Sarafov) is analysed by Keith Brown, and textbooks in post-1989 Romania are discussed by Mirale-Luminița Murgescu.

Common to all contributions and authors is a critical (deconstructionist) approach towards official national memories and identities. These are questioned by exposing outright falsifications and myths (e.g. in history textbooks), comparing them with alternative narratives (anti-heroes, oral histories, other testimonies) and showing the conditions under which they were produced and the purposes they serve, as well as their changing fortunes across political regimes. One exception to this critical approach is the very erudite pursuit back to Hellenic times by Costa Carras of Greek ('national') identity, in line with the 'primordialist' approach to nationhood. Actually, this essay gives an idea of the dominant (and official) approach in all Balkan countries, which are proud of their noble ancient roots. But the author is much more subtle, and, rather than looking for continuities in ethnicity, he is content to point to some persistent cultural traits of 'Greekness', such as agonistic individualism, close family ties, respect for culture and education and so on.

Critical inquiry itself varies from a more head-on myth-fighting approach through various 'deconstructionist' (anyway, strongly critical) techniques such as confronting official narratives with lived experiences, working closer to 'truth' and so on to the proposed ironic treatment of the national narrative by Keith Brown in reference to Susan Stewart.<sup>2</sup> The problem with deconstruction is that it has 'its own reconstructive dimension' (as Brown puts it), while irony goes beyond a 'realistic' narrative and creates 'a forum in which openendedness and uncertainty, so much a part of history as lived, are not erased, but rather emphasised' (p. 250). This also serves as an antidote to more serious-minded historical narratives. One can only agree that even if constructing national identity is still a pressing issue, history has to be narrated (and depicted) in more than one mode and genre, and that serious realistic accounts, independent of their veracity, should not occupy all the ground; furthermore, heroic themes should not claim for themselves all that is worthy of narrating and remembering. But at the other (popularising) end, the question still remains as to how textbooks in particular should balance critical concerns, historical veracity, pedagogical simplification and the still strongly felt need to impart national identities. And how should popular demand and pressure for simple truths and clear-cut fronts be dealt with (not least by the media), if critical-minded historians are not to be excluded? There is no easy answer to such questions.

The collection of essays edited by John Lampe and Mark Mazover, and written mostly by young researchers, approaches a number of cultural topics in twentieth-century Balkan history. The themes, centred on ideologies and national identities and symbols, display variety and richness. The quality of the pieces is somewhat uneven but mostly very good and, in the cases discussed below, outstanding. Constantin Iordachi's contribution is a successful attempt to apply Max Weber's notion of charisma (and its sub-types and evolution) to the leadership and organisation of the peculiar Romanian interwar fascist party, the Legion of the Archangel Michael. Special mention should be made of Andrew Wachtel's masterful analysis of the ideological uses and interpretations of the Montenegrin classic writer Petar Petrović

<sup>2</sup> Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

Njegoš (his epic 'The Mountain Wreath' in particular) throughout the interwar, communist and post-communist epochs, for purposes of identity formation and political legitimacy. In the various interpretations of the epic, the Montenegrin, Serb, Yugoslav and anti-Muslim components have been stressed according to political need and played off against each other or combined to form 'alliances'.

Competing identities, political projects and memories in Yugoslavia form the substance of several contributions in this collection: Marko Bulatović (on interwar Serb political thought), Dejan Jović (on the 'others' who helped differentiate communist Yugoslavia), and Mark Biondich (on attempts to come to grips with the Ustasha legacy). The very interesting case of 'divided claims' for the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO) between Bulgarian and Macedonian politicians and historians is treated by James Frusetta, again with attention to the policy turns in the course of time. There is an interesting contribution (by Sandra Prlenda) on the Croat Catholic youth organisations of the interwar period and their function in shaping characters and mentalities. The chapter by Ildiko Erdei discusses the socialist 'production of childhood' by Yugoslavia's Pioneer Organisation and the change from its overtly ideological and disciplinary approach to an emphasis on study and the projection of the image of the 'happy child'. Rossitza Guentcheva has researched the rather curious topic of sounds and noise in socialist Bulgaria in terms of the regime's various ideologically motivated attitudes (and campaigns) towards noise, both in public places and private quarters. Finally, Maja Brkljačić touches on the role of popular culture in communist Yugoslavia, particularly folk epics, while Robert Austin purports to explain why the Albanian state does not aspire to be a Greater Albania.

As can be noted from this brief review, there is certain imbalance in favour of Serb and Yugoslav contributions, while Greece is entirely missing. The predilection of these young historians (most of them from the Balkans) for a variety of postmodern theories, approaches and perspectives and their skill in applying them to particular subjects is noteworthy. Generally, they succeed in creating interesting, rich and analytically discerning essays. The outcome is a book of great variety within the framework of cultural studies, with a strong interpretative bent and numerous inter-textual links.

The volume on the 'Macedonian question' contains contributions of a different type: historical essays and political analyses cum policy recommendations. It starts with a good, informative and balanced introductory essay on the 'origins of the Macedonian dispute' by Elisabeth Baker. She traces the changing identity of the Slavs in Macedonia from one which was Bulgarian, then Serbian and finally Macedonian, and the way they were regarded by the neighbouring countries; she then proceeds to contextualise the issue in the eventful history of the region. Kyril Drezov's contribution strives towards a scholarly distance and a kind of non-partisan 'objectivity' in presenting the various claims on 'Macedonian identity' both historically and in the present. As he points out, the notoriously partisan scholars (and politicians) of the region – Macedonians included – are guided by their respective nationalist projects and in turn project them back on to the past. They all fail to

account for the historically fluid, flexible and changing 'national' identity of the people in the region. Apart from notoriously 'erroneous' notions, this is because they turn identities which were held for some time and in some part of the territory into timeless essences and thus into dogmatic untruths. The contribution by Stefan Troebst on the 'politics of Macedonian historiography', in addition to criticising the historiography (and there is much to criticise for political bias, mythologising and so on), contains his own attempt to make sense of modern Macedonian history in terms of M. Hroch's 'phases of development' of national movements in Eastern Europe. This is quite convincing; my objection would only be that the criticism is too sharp, perhaps because it engages extreme views which are, admittedly, abundant and popular, and is not sufficiently fair to more balanced historical views.

The contribution by Evangelos Kofos is of special interest. The author attempts to explain the official Greek position that for years refused recognition to the Macedonian state because of its name and flag (supposedly related to Alexander of Macedonia). This is a detailed, very sophisticated and perceptively written chapter that follows both the scholarly and popular debates in Greece on the subject, together with the convolutions of Greek (party and personal) politics and power games. Still, the author fails to distance himself sufficiently from the strongly nationalist Greek stance (of broad segments of society, politicians, and many scholars) on the matter. This impression is indirectly confirmed by the very length to which he goes in both explaining and at least partly justifying the motives behind Greek suspicions of eventual Macedonian claims. He also seems to be unhappy with the 'tactics' of Greek politics in asserting their claims (which harmed the image of Greece in the European Union and in the Balkans), with which he otherwise seems to identify. There is no need to discuss at this point whether a small and weak Macedonia might actually ever pose a threat to Greece, the statements of some Macedonian nationalists notwithstanding; the point is that Greece, finding itself in a better situation than other Balkan countries, should have taken a more generous stance towards a newly formed Macedonian state. Besides, Greek politics, by being so apprehensive of threats and by explaining them so beautifully in terms of the past, encouraged nationalism. My point is that generosity would better serve the cause of Balkan security and co-operation than going into the past and taking up grievances and recriminations that are surely not solely the domain of the Greeks. Interestingly, the same attitude is taken up and reproduced by the volume's editor, James Pettifer, who tries in his contribution to persuade us that Greece has grounds for apprehension by repeating Kofos's arguments and arguing the Greek 'sensitive' nationalist position.

While it is not possible to discuss all contributions one by one, I should like to draw attention to a very solid historical piece by Ivanka Nedeva and Naoum Kaytchev on the attitude of the Bulgarian Communists to the Macedonian movement (and especially the IMRO). Based on archival and other sources it traces changing attitudes up to the present day. The authors show that the Macedonian activists were initially ignored by the Communist authorities but then severely persecuted and repressed during the short-lived project in 1946 for a federation between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. However, the communist regime tolerated Macedonian

cultural-educational societies, organised in a union under tight supervision, with an increasingly Bulgarian nationalist orientation; it is against this background that an organisation claiming the IMRO inheritance (and calling itself IMRO) sprang up in Bulgaria after the changes in 1989. Finally, there is a good description by Jens Reuter of the present-day situation in Macedonia and its major difficulties and dangers. Apart from economic difficulties, he discusses the Albanian problem and external threats to Macedonian security, and pronounces himself against exaggerating the Macedonian nationalism of IMRO-DPMNE, the party claiming continuity with the IMRO.

The remaining three books all deal with the Yugoslav wars: what happened and why, who is mainly to blame, directly or indirectly, and what should have been done to avoid the tragedy. According to Tom Gallagher, until the Dayton agreements the wars were started and waged by aggressive Serb nationalism, counteracted by a somewhat lesser Croat nationalism; they were primarily ethnic wars. The 'moral equivalence' stance in the sense that all sides were (at least to an extent) guilty is emphatically rejected, especially as far as the Bosnian Muslims are concerned. But the actual purpose of the book, written by a specialist in 'ethnic conflict and peace', is to criticise European Union (EU) and NATO policies in not being timely and resolute enough to stop the Serbs and prevent the disintegration of Yugoslavia (or at least the war and its atrocities). The author blames Western politicians for a lack of imagination and resourcefulness, the EU for lack of a concerted foreign policy (even though he does not attach too much importance to Germany's hurried recognition of Slovenia and Croatia) and Britain for a pro-Serb bias and for taking a non-interventionist stance. Finally NATO is found to be at fault for delaying its intervention. The armed intervention by NATO and the United States is viewed positively as a way towards the resolution of the conflict, although, according to the author, it was wrong to negotiate the 1995 Dayton agreements with Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman as the main perpetrators of the crimes. Predictably, fault is also found with the actions of UN peace-keeping troops on the ground. For all the vigorous critique of Western (in particular European) politicians for failing to respond adequately to the mounting conflict, the author does not tell us much about what should have been the appropriate reaction, when and how. Nor is much said on how Yugoslavia could have been preserved (his first preference). But one can assume from the whole argument that he puts much (professional) faith in consulting experts on conflict prevention and conflict resolution when acting in such situations.

Quite the opposite interpretation of the Yugoslav wars is provided by the prominent social critic Michael Parenti (as evidenced by the very title: 'The attack on Yugoslavia'). This is a mighty and morally indignant denunciation of Western and especially US involvement in Yugoslavia. The 'managing' of the wars is seen as yet another striking example of US imperialism and neo-colonialism at the service of global corporate business with its 'free-market' ideology and vested interests in opening up foreign markets and access to resources in order to maximise gains. According to the author, Western politicians and strategic planners were not at all unaware or mistaken about what was going on in the Balkans; on the contrary, they

acted in a very deliberate and precise manner. The double standards and duplicity of all official and media rhetoric about genocide, human rights and democracy was actually concealing imperialist and free-market agendas. The author argues that only in cases where international corporations encounter obstacles in their free-market crusade are regimes being targeted. Free-market and US-friendly regimes are left unbothered, however ruthlessly they behave towards their own people (in Latin America and elsewhere). International principles and agreements (such as those concerning national sovereignty) are flagrantly disregarded. The author points out that the media, corporate-owned and governed, were carried away by their own assumptions and preconceived notions that made them ready to listen to and to believe the Croats and the Albanians and turn a deaf ear to the Serbs. Thus they created a one-sided and distorted picture and shaped public opinion in accordance with official policies. Parenti's criticism extends even to well-wishing Western liberal intellectuals, who were often misled by this propaganda and failed to discern the connection between politics and financial interests.

Parenti attempts to prove his point by assembling information from various sources (especially official ones) that admit, mostly in an undertone, the misreporting of events, incongruities, lack of corroboration or reliable witnesses and so on. This had the effect of blaming only the Serbs, and neglecting misdeeds by Croats and Albanians. Nationalism in general does not play an important role in this account of the war. The real aggressor is NATO, led by the United States, and their bombs allegedly caused most civilian casualties. They also deliberately destroyed economic capacity, leading to the 'third mondialisation' of a recalcitrant Yugoslavia and making it more receptive to Western influence and economic penetration (and in need of the International Monetary Fund and other agencies of the United States). The question arises as to the validity of this interpretation. Even if the author is credited with putting the 'facts' straight (and balancing out the Serb victims with those of the other sides in the conflict), the overall interpretation is too general to be 'proved' or 'disproved' by them. While one might agree with many points – misrepresentation of events by the media, 'double morals', duplicity and propaganda on the part of many Western politicians, very shaky legal grounds for intervention, bias against the Serbs, the adverse effects of the bombings and so on – the arguments for the existence of a completely deliberate and planned policy by the West and the alleged link between corporate globalisation and the Balkan wars are unconvincing. Are US interests in the Balkans really so strategic and vital? Are the comparatively resourceless Balkans so important? And what about the more direct EU interests in the region?

Finally, the journalist and scholar Neven Andjelić presents us with an internal perspective on events in Bosnia-Herzegovina: what happened there from the death of Tito in 1980 to the eve of the war. Central in this account is the weakening of communist rule, which in Bosnia was particularly rigid in order to contain possible ethnic and religious tensions, but was long seen by the population as rather successful and progressive. The author describes a series of economic scandals in the later Yugoslav years, the most serious involving the firm Agrocomerc that became a sort of 'pyramid' scheme, which discredited communist rule and nourished the modest

beginnings of civil society in Bosnia (in the form of protest groups and actions). At the same time, and especially with democratisation and the first free elections, nationalist forces sprang up and organised effectively, revealing the awkward fact that democracy and nationalism can go hand in hand. An economic crisis increased the disenchantment of the population with liberal market democracy or what stood for it. The rise of Serb and Croat nationalism outside the republic contributed to this development. As the author points out, nationalism gained strength because it seems to offer an easy explanation of the difficulties (the ethnic Others are to blame), from which a 'solution' seems to follow. Incompetent and corrupt Communist leaders, constituting the major rival force, could not put up effective resistance and the nationalist parties won the elections, only to prove unable to co-operate. This paved the road to war inside the republic, but not without the external influence of escalating Serb and Croat nationalism outside Bosnia plus the cleavage between the more cosmopolitan urban population and the more nationalist villages.

In the introduction the author takes issue with various familiar explanations of the war. He is especially keen to reject explanations which rely on the notion of long-standing hatreds (and longer-term causes in general). First of all, because they are historically untrue: there were in the Bosnian case equally strong traditions of tolerance and cohabitation between religions under the Ottomans (while ethnic divisions were not in the foreground). Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis in particular is contradicted by the Bosnian case of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians and the fluidity of its borders (Bosnia passed from Ottoman to Habsburg rule). In looking for affective causes (attitudes, emotions) of the war, one should not go beyond 'living memory', reaching in this case to the Second World War and the fighting between Ustasha and partisans, with the Muslims caught in the middle. But far more important than that – in the opinion of the author – are more recent events such as the last decades of the communist rule that form the substance of his narrative. His own model of explanation, as laid out previously, is more structural and rational, treating people as acting out of rational motives in their environment.

What makes it so hard to make sense of the war in Yugoslavia or even to establish a consensus about it is that the war of interpretations that accompanied it is still going on, with the parties as committed as ever. The fact that it is treated in scholarly books should not make us expect some authoritative, once-and-for-all meaning or interpretation of that complex event, composed of failed post-communist reforms, Balkan nationalisms, European endeavours, and US imperialism.

War feeds on nationalism and identity politics turned against others, and it leaves bitter memories. This makes it all the more important to deconstruct and counteract fixed identities, national myths and heroic narratives, as in the critical contributions discussed in the first part of this review. It is a good sign that they come mostly from within the region itself.