

Reviews of Books

René Ristelhueber, *A History of the Balkan Peoples*, edited and translated by Sherman David Spector, New York, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971.

Professor Spector has made available in English an excellent translation of René Ristelhueber's *Histoire des peuples balkaniques*. Published for the first time in Paris two decades ago, updated and with the story brought down to the present time by Professor Spector, the work does not claim to be an original scholarly research on the history of the Balkan peninsula; it is rather a basic introductory survey covering mainly the modern and contemporary eras and addressed both to the college student and the layman who wish to know more about the past and the present history of these peoples, their role in the European affairs, as well as the prospects surrounding the emergence of the Balkan states in the arena of world politics.

The study covers the long history of the peoples who inhabit the peninsula —the Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians, Yugoslavs, and Albanians, and the former rulers of them all— the Ottoman Turks. It begins with a very brief outline of the history of each of these peoples from the very beginning down to the nineteenth century. The second part focuses on the national struggle for independence, followed by an analysis of the creation of the Balkan states and their historical evolution down to the eve of World War I. The last section deals with the Balkans from the outbreak of the Great War to the end of the Second World War. Professor Spector added a last chapter covering the history of post-war era to 1967. An extensive chronological table with the most important events in the history of the Balkans is appended to the book as well as a selected bibliographical list. The translator and editor also makes careful parenthetical notes throughout the study, illuminating and updating the material and the various interpretations and research work concerning the history of the Balkans since the time of the original publication in 1950. In studying the history of the Balkans the authors stress two important elements: first, the role of the Great Powers, and second, the importance of the force of nationalism in shaping the life and history of the peoples in this region. The active involvement of the European powers in the peninsula dates back to the eighteenth century. The decline of the Ottoman Empire simultaneously with the rising of the spirit of nationalism liberated by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, transformed the Balkans into a «powder-keg» and the meeting place of great-power rivalries. The Balkan peoples, on the other hand, divided and hostile toward each other since ancient times, never achieved unity and collaboration among themselves. Faced with the perennial antagonism of the European powers, Austria and Russia, as well as England and France, they often preferred the support and assistance of foreign powers in achieving their national goals and aspirations, thereby falling under the influence of one or another Great Power. The authors lay particular stress on the rivalry between Habsburg Austria and Imperial Russia which dominated the history of the Balkans down to the eve of World War I, when the clash between these two imperialist powers ignited the fire of Europe in 1914. The First and the Second World War brought independence and readjustments in the boundaries of the Balkan states but did not solve the perennial questions which beset the peninsula. Eastern Europe and the Balkan states, with the exception of Greece, came under the control of the Soviet Union. Attempts at breaking away from the orbit of political alignments and asserting their national independence have often been the source of great power intervention in

the internal affairs of the Balkan states. The survey indicates that small states rarely became implicated into conflicts without great-power intrigues. The creation of great-power influence in this region has been responsible for all major wars which occurred in the Balkans. In this connection, it is clear that the Balkan peoples have unjustly been accused of being international troublemakers. Out of a number of eight wars which broke out in the peninsula since 1800, only two were local, the rest being military contests carried out by the European powers and the Ottoman Empire, in which the Balkan peoples were inadvertently implicated.

The dynamics of Balkan history, however, is still the powerful force of nationalism. It acted both as a unifying and disruptive element throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The authors suggest that the persistence of Balkan disunity is due mainly to this factor. The great upheavals which beset the peninsula failed to teach its peoples the necessity of solidarity and close cooperation. Instead of diminishing old passions, animosities and rivalries, instead of building bridges of understanding, the region was dominated and divided by this powerful ingredient. It is this force that drives the people to assert their national identity in the midst of great-power influence. But in spite of the resurgence of a new nationalistic spirit, it is fair to say that the Balkan states will still remain attached to one or another Great Power. It cannot be said that the process of national reassertion and the attempts at breaking away from great-power influence on the part of East European countries, including the Balkans, would be met with complete success. For one thing, the Soviet Union would never allow a realignment on its western borders, nor will she permit any of them to become a potential threat to her own security. Professor Spector suggests that the only way by which the Balkan peoples could live in peace and harmony is through the adoption of a policy of disinterestedness by the Great Powers. Such an approach has indeed considerable merit. It should be added, however, that it is the Balkan peoples themselves who could make peace work in the peninsula. To this end, they must accept the principle of «good neighbor», of learning to live in peaceful terms and friendly relations, in cooperation and mutual respect toward each other.

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Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1971, pp. 128.

Though the bandit lurks on the borders of all national histories he is seldom recognized save as a sign of decline or as a euphemism for anti-establishment forces. Traditionally, unsuccessful rebels have become bandits in their failure, though currently bandits are often romanticised into revolutionaries. Perhaps the only respectful treatment of the bandit in history is to be found in those precious moments when he stands against a foreign oppressor, showing, of course, that his nationalism triumphs over his criminality, and perhaps earning a pardon in the process. But how accurate are these images and why is the bandit so ubiquitous? It is to these and related questions that Eric Hobsbawm turns in *Bandits*, an elaboration of the pattern he developed earlier in *Primitive Rebels* (1959).

Noting «social banditry» to be a phenomenon of young, unattached men on the edges of rural society, Hobsbawm ties its definition to continued popular support. The law defines Robin Hood as criminal but not the peasants who see him as righteous and heroic. Wherever an oppressed peasantry exists the social bandit appears in amazingly uniform groups to provide a hope (or myth) of justice that the law can or will not. And whenever a pre-capitalist