

Book Reviews

Dennis P. Hupchick, *The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism*, New York: Palgrave, 2002, pp. 468.

“Semper aliquid novi Africam afferre”.
Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, viii. 17.

To paraphrase Pliny the Elder, “There is always something new out of the Balkans!”. The distinguished Scottish author, Hector Munro, had a short story about a British M. P. who, referring to the island of Crete, is alleged to have observed: “The island of Crete produces more history than it can consume locally”. If that style remark was still in fashion today, it might well have been applied to the Balkans.

By the bridge that crosses the river in the middle of Sarajevo stands a black and white post on which is painted a prayer for world peace. A few yards away is the spot where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in June 1914. The horrors which that murder inflicted on the world early last century revisited Sarajevo and the Balkan region during the last decade of the 20th century and the first year of the 21st. Since nation states became the normal form of international organization about 400 years ago, just about every decade has seen examples of one nation attacking another. This, alas, is particularly the record in the Balkan region throughout the 19th century as a result of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. A situation known as “The Eastern Question”, involving regional nations and Balkan ethnic groups in an effort to deal with the “opportunities” afforded by the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Territorial conquest and ethnic engineering helped form the Balkans modern states in the wars of the early and late 19th and early 20th century, and western powers then seemed happy to egg their various proxies on.

Given the many excellent books already written on the history of the Balkans: L. S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453*, (first published in 1958; reissued, London, 2000); G. Castellan, *History of the Balkans* (New York, 1992); Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1983); And, Mark Mazower, *The Balkans* (New York, 2000), *The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism* is the most recent.

The Balkans by professor Hupchick, is nothing if not ambitious. Its 468 pages take us through the long and rather melancholy history of the region. The result is an immensely rich and valuable contribution to history and our understanding and appreciation of the complex, religious, ethnic and other forces that had and continue to influence the history and destiny of the region

and its diverse population.

The author divides his book into five sections, "parts", covering the history of the Balkans from A.D. 600 to 1991. The five "parts" are then divided into 20 chapters, with excellent introduction, most useful maps, helpful glossary, splendid bibliography, and index.

The history of the Balkans is a mind-boggling parade of horrors, triumphs, glories, and disasters. Actually, more disasters than triumphs. For curious human beings and especially students of European history, it is an endlessly fascinating, and complex subject. The author takes the reader through 1,400 years of history in a region of the world where the Hellenic, Slavic, and Ottoman worlds met, mingled and clashed. A region where Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam met more often in religious confrontations rather than in peace and cooperation. It is a region rich in its Byzantine and Ottoman past. There are minor gaps in the story. But the canvas is so broad and complex that even in a book of this length, it is virtually impossible to cover it all.

Dennis P. Hupchick is associate professor of history at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania. As a Fulbright scholar to Bulgaria, he has experienced the geographic obstacles of the region, and become sensitive of the presence of the divisive power of the regions' "isms". In the Balkans, what geography unites, religious ethnic, and ideological "isms" divide. This area of south-eastern Europe is, indeed, prisoner of its past history. Here only the past is certain.

Today in the Balkans, we are faced with the possibility of dreadful escalation of animosities: Kosovo falls, Macedonia is invaded, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey become involved; the Muslim states agitate for unilateral action; and the United Nations is left still further behind. The splinters and fall-out from the collapsing structure will do more than simply hurt or embarrass NATO and the Western European Union. Alas, a not so unrealistic scenario. Some hundred years ago, Mr. Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928), the Italian prime minister, early last century, used a riveting phrase when he spoke of the "beautiful legends" that nourished newborn states. In the Balkans, we have frightening nightmares.

The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism is an important scholarly contribution to students of history, past and present, to our knowledge and understanding of the Balkan region and its people. Professor Hupchick should be commended for his fine book. *The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism* should be required reading for all those who need to understand the history of the area and its complexities.

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