



The Balkans: A Short History

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Throughout history, the Balkans have been a crossroads, a zone of endless military, cultural, and economic mixing and clashing between Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, Catholicism and Orthodoxy. In this highly acclaimed short history, Mark Mazower sheds light on what has been called the tinderbox of Europe, whose troubles have ignited wider wars for hundreds of years. Focusing on events from the emergence of the nation-state onward, *The Balkans* reveals with piercing clarity the historical roots of current conflicts and gives a landmark reassessment of the region's history, from the world wars and the Cold War to the collapse of communism, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the continuing search for stability in southeastern Europe.

The Balkans: A Short History Details

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Jim says

The Balkans can seem rather forbidding to a Westerner who sees the whole region as the epitome of violence and savagery. Mark Mazower, on the other hand, takes the Balkans as a whole rather than skipping from country to country and losing the reader in the process. It is only in the last two chapters of *The Balkans: A Short History* that Mazower identifies the destructive forces of nationalism that, for all intents and purposes, did not exist before the decay of the Ottoman Empire, but only came into play toward the end of the 19th century.

Incidentally, the author treats Greece as one of the Balkans, as it rightly should. We tend to give the country a Get Out of Jail Free card because of its remote association with Athenian democracy.

If you read this book, as I think you should, you will end up thinking better of the old Ottoman Empire and far, far worse of the virulent nationalisms that replaced it, at least on the Balkan Peninsula.

Kenneth P. says

This is indeed a short history. Most of it is very good. We get an informative overview of the empires (Byzantine, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian) that ruled the Balkan peninsula and left indelible cultural markers. Lest we leap to conclusions about the alleged Balkan propensity for violence, Mr. Mazower takes great pains to remind us of the crimes of the West. Of course he's right. But it comes off, eventually, as "See, everybody else does it." He treats the Balkan wars of the 1990's with an epilogue. It's a nine page lecture entitled "On Violence" that explains how the people of the Balkans are no more violent than the rest of us. In doing so he walks away from his job. He refuses to write history. His attitude seems to be, oh well, in a civil war stuff happens. There is no mention of the 4 year long siege of Sarajevo, of the Serbian death-camps in Srebrenica and elsewhere, of the tens of thousands of raped Bosnian women. Nor does he speak of the atrocities committed against Serbian civilians by the KLA. He speaks only of American lynchings of Blacks and German concentration camps. We get it Professor Mazower. We all have skeletons. But when you walk away from the 90's Balkan wars I wonder if you have an agenda, a dog in the fight. As an educator you should know that Political Correctness is always your enemy.

todd says

mazower provides an excellent overview of dominant themes present throughout the history of the region and expertly punctures many persistent myths. unfortunately, the title suggests that this book serves as a good introduction to the history of the balkans, whereas i often found myself wishing that i had already read

a (more truly) introductory work. recommended for those who are already familiar with the geography and history of the region.

Lyn Elliott says

Mazower has achieved something remarkable with this book –a clear, readable, measured historical overview of a complex region in just 135 pages that explains the factors underlying the violent conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, concentrating on the transition from peasant societies, organised by religious community under the Ottoman empire, to modern nation states.

The introductory chapter is called ‘Names’. The first paragraph tells us that the name by which we call the region, the Balkans, has only been used over the last two hundred years or so. Under the 500 year Ottoman rule, it was Rumeli.

Mazower offers an incisive summary of the stereotypes applied by most westerners to ‘the Balkans’ and to ‘the Ottomans’, noting that the basic historiographical challenge is how to fit the Ottoman centuries into the history of Europe as a whole and concluding that European Romantic nationalism gave the Balkan peoples the ethnic categories by which they defined themselves and which led to destructive wars and genocides. Names become labels of identity and identification, indicators of inclusion or exclusion, acceptance or rejection.

Following Braudel and some political geographers, Mazower discusses the influence of the mountainous terrain of the region on political and economic life and the pressure points like who controls the trade routes and the good land.

He outlines the Ottoman system of government, in which subjects were divided into communities on the basis of belief (Christian – both Catholic and Orthodox- Muslim and Jewish) and ruled largely by their own ecclesiastical hierarchy but these communities lived together in relative harmony, with considerable blurring of the divide between them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Mazower outlines the introduction of European ideas from the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement, including an emphasis on the cultural value of peasant languages such as Bulgarian, Serbian or Romanian, which led to the creation of the first Balkan nation states in the 1830s.

The second half of the book deals with the tensions between these new states, the struggles between the Great Powers for influence in the region, and the conflicts that flowed from the states’ push for territory and ethnic homogeneity, displacing and killing millions.

At the time of writing, Mazower saw the main threat to the Balkan nation states as coming, not from the old empires or the rivalry and hostility of its neighbours, but from the globalizing international economy. In 2001, The Guardian reported that Mazower’s concern about misinterpretation of the causes of the most recent Balkan wars drove him to write this book. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/200...>

‘His hope is that by presenting some historical facts about the region in a demystifying way, "a number of people will make the correct argument that it wasn't all about ancient ethnic hatreds, and that the real history of the Balkans is very different, and the roots of modern violence are a little bit more complicated than just putting it into the past. But that just makes the question of what that past actually was more pertinent. It

doesn't necessarily help with policy, because policy wants to know about other things, but it helps people understand the region, and perhaps in a funny way makes the present seem less like the only thing that matters. If you see that it was very different 300 years ago, by implication it could be very different in 200 years' time, and that's not a completely trivial thing to bear in mind."

Hana says

Winston Churchill described the Balkans as a region that produces more history than it can consume. Mark Mazower packs centuries of Balkan history into this slim but illuminating volume; it's so concentrated it felt rather like one of those high-protein energy bars with 2,000 calories and two inches of munching. At a mere 153 pages it is (to quote Publishers Weekly) "a highly suggestive analysis of an inexhaustible subject." Mazower's insights are so intriguing that I longed for another hundred or two hundred more pages and a more expansive argument.

Mazower sees nationalism as the prime (but not sole) destabilizing element. Just as Europe gave the Balkans the categories with which its people defined themselves, so it gave them the ideological weapon of self-destruction--modern romantic nationalism.

But he demonstrates that many other factors hastened the demise of the Ottoman Empire and forced rapid transitions that fragmented Balkan Europe, among them: Russian and Austro-Hungarian ambitions, new trade patterns and land ownership rules, and an increasingly money-based economy that made it harder for farmers to get by.

The first half of the book is the strongest, introducing the land, its peoples, the Ottoman Empire and the early changes that heralded modernity.

A Hard Land

Harkening back to Fernand Braudel, Mazower introduces us to the land and the mountains that dominate (and give their name) to the Balkans. The mountains shaped the often difficult lives of its people. Unlike the mountain chains guarding the necks of the Iberian and Italian peninsulas, the Balkan ranges offered no barrier against invasion. But they hindered easy commerce and deprived much of the peninsula of the moisture found in Europe's continental climatic zone.

Balkan rivers "descend too rapidly to be navigable, or else meander idly away from the coastline". The mountains precluded construction of the kind of canals that helped commerce to flourish in 18th century England. Rail networks came late to the Balkans and were less extensive than in other parts of Europe. In short, the land held its people back.

The Ottoman Empire—Rome and Byzantium's Inheritor

Mazower is particularly helpful showing the strengths of the Ottoman system and the degree to which continuity and cultural diversity were maintained in the transition from Byzantine rule. Members of the Bosnian and Byzantine nobility served the Sultan loyally. The characterization of the Ottoman system as Turkish was incorrect. "As late as the 19th century it was noted that 'no Mussulman ever called himself a Turk' (The term was used to refer to Anatolian peasants.)" So prominent was the presence of converts at the

Porte that for a time Slavic rivaled Turkish as a court language.

“Asked what religion they were, the cautious peasants of Western Macedonia would cross themselves and say, 'We are Muslims, but of the Virgin Mary'.” In this shared world, "devotional practice cut across theological divides not only in the realm of the supernatural but also in the daily mundane life of the Ottoman world.”

Piracy and brigandage were ongoing issues, but the Ottoman state could cope with this. It was used to negotiating with, and often bringing into service, those rebels too powerful or elusive to punish and kill.

It all worked fairly well in an old world, but change was coming—inexorably.

How 'Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm After They've Seen Paree?

The lyrics to this hugely popular 1918 song were true for not just for American soldiers, but for the millions in Europe increasingly exposed to the lures of city life.

Urbanization was changing people's lives, their very desires. Mazower cites the contempt with which an urban girl views the peasant hill-dwellers and notes the longing for new fashions, lipsticks, and chic clothes. And to buy those fashions, almost entirely imported to Ottoman Europe from Western Europe, one needed money.

In the Turkish Empire--as in Austria-Hungary and Tsarist Russia--the coming of a money economy disrupted older patterns of social relations and helped pave the way for political changes as well. Nationalism as a mass movement involved the peasants, yet for them what counted were their rights to land, livelihood and fair taxes, while most of the nationalist political struggles were city-bred.

The Eastern Question

Section Three covers the 'long 19th century' from the French Revolution to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. Mazower's highly compressed style works less effectively here--thirty pages are just too few to tell this highly complex tale. Zigzagging constantly between emerging countries and time periods the narrative gets pretty confusing. The overly abbreviated timeline is unhelpful.

The book is weakest in the fourth section—just where the analysis needed to delve most deeply. Again, the problem is over compression. Building the Nation-State takes us at breakneck speed through the end of World War I, the Greco-Turkish War, the population transfers, World War II and the Nazi occupation, Bolshevism, the rise and fall of the Communist states, and the 1990s breakup of Yugoslavia. All in 28 pages!

The human side of things gets stripped out, replaced by numbers; even the 'Great Men' make mere cameo appearances. Kemal Atatürk and Elefthérios Venizélos make it on stage for a two paragraph discussion of the Greek-Turkish population exchange. After stressing the interwoven nature of the old Ottoman Empire, it's a little sad that Mazower describes this breakup so clinically, simply noting that the two leaders viewed the exchange as vital to create ethnically homogeneous nation states.

As a thought-provoking series of essays, *The Balkans: A Short History* is terrific and leaves me wanting to learn more; readers unfamiliar with European and Ottoman history may find it a bit confusing.

Jibran says

We are so familiar with nation-states; every country is supposed to have a native population that belongs to a single race or ethnicity, speaks a single language, follows a single religion (or professes nominal ties to it), and expresses itself through a culture produced by the synthesis of the above.

Western political discourse viewed the creation and consolidation of nation-states as the only logical grouping of people in modern times, one that all the societies in the world should aspire to, in order to make the necessary transition from the age of empires and kingdoms. Mark Mazower argues that this Western-Europe-centric political idea, although it eventually benefited Western Europe, has been a major source of death and destruction in the countries of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

He expands on this thesis by taking stock of the politics and cultures of Balkan countries under the Ottoman-Turkish rule. His argument is two-fold: One, to show that the Ottoman-held Balkans were thriving societies, culturally, socially and economically, as opposed to miserable and backward 'lost lands' of Europe under the brutal rule of the barbarian Turks - a view famous with Western intelligentsia well into the second half of the 20th century.

Two, the roots of the political and social upheavals which have marked the Balkans in the 20th century (the latest being Serb-led genocide of Bosniaks and Croats in the 1990s) lay not in their "cultural barbarity" and intolerance borrowed from their Ottoman ex-masters, but rather spring from European ideology of race-based nationalism, whose ultimate aim was to create centralised, homogenous nation-states.

One marked difference between the Balkan peasant societies and their North European counterparts was that there was near absence of feudal holdings in the former. The land belonged to the Sultan, people tilled it and shared the produce in the shape of taxes with the imperial government. In North Europe, however, feudals literally owned peasants like land and chattel. Through this the writer concludes that peasants in Ottoman Europe had had far greater social and economic freedoms than their brethren in rest of the Europe. This fact allowed greater movement of people to areas with good agriculture and business, and with time, every Balkan country became ethnically and religiously diverse.

There was only one major tag that defined the subjects of the Ottoman empire: religion. Muslims, by virtue of being rulers, were first class citizens. Christian and Jews were 'protected religions' (Dhimmis) as per official view of Islam. This sanction allowed Christians to retain and preserve their religion, sects, languages, and by extension, their cultures. So neither the imperial religion nor the language was forced on the masses. So much so that at one point Christians serving in the imperial court in Constantinople were so numerous that Greek and Slavic languages were given preference over Turkish in official proceedings. In part due to geography, in part economy, and in part for the policies of the imperial state, the Balkans became racially, linguistically and religiously diverse.

The weakening hold of the Ottomans on their Balkan colonies coincided with the rising powers of Britain and France. As Balkan countries gained independence - starting with Greece - the new breed of linguistic/ethnic nationalists were posed with a question. How to create homogenous ethno-lingual nation-states on Western Europe model in a landscape so diverse and mixed? New nation-states that had sprung up through a long and painful political process still had significant minorities (Albanians and Turks in Greece, Albanians in Serbia, Bulgarians in Romania, Greek, Turks, Jews in Macedonia, Greeks in Turkish

mainland). They didn't know what to do with minorities except force mass population exchanges and in some cases go for ethnic cleansing. This, the writer asserts, is the direct consequence of remodeling the Balkans to conform to Western European ideals in a very short period.

After a brief flirtation with Western-imported free market democracy, the fissures and fractures induced by nationalistic ideas were swept under the carpet during the Communist period. Old animosities did not die away but were harshly controlled as Communism viewed itself as beyond race and religion. They resurfaced as soon as Communism crumbled. The experiment of Yugoslavia is an example to come to terms with the simmering question of nationalism; genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo was another sorry chapter of the same phenomenon.

Ironically, just as it appears that the Balkans have solved their nationalist and ethnic conflicts, the rest of Europe has moved on. The creation of multicultural societies in major Western countries is the exact opposite of what the Balkans have been fighting for all along, until a couple of decades ago. Diversity in Europe today mirrors the mixed societies of Ottoman-held Balkans; that is, London, Paris and Frankfurt today are as diverse as Istanbul, Athens and Belgrade were during the Ottoman times.

History repeats itself?

In conclusion, with all things considered, the book categorically rejects the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with the cultures of the Slavs which, 'cut off' from the 'civilised European motherland', have been tainted and brutalised during five centuries of Muslim rule - a view which has been the mainstay of Western academia until recently.

Murtaza says

This is a really gifted example of how to do "A Short History" of any part of the world effectively. While running less than 200 pages, Mazower manages to give a satisfactory snapshot of the emergence of the modern Balkans and the background of its peoples.

Much of the book is actually about the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the Balkans during the period when distinct national identities began to form. Contrary to later nationalist myth, the lines between Bulgarian, Serbian and Bosnian historically not so clear to the people living in the region. It was common to identify with a different ethnicity by choice, based on what was more convenient or appealing at the moment. Religious identity was more important, but even that was far more permeable and ecumenical than we tend to assume today. In the Balkans people would often practice all religions simultaneously or view apostasy more as the accretion of new beliefs rather than the total shedding of old ones. This spiritual promiscuity is reminiscent of pre-Partition India with its shared shrines, saints and religious practices.

During the dismemberment of Ottoman Europe, new identities were ginned up according to the logic of modern nationalism. The new countries and peoples created were haphazardly constructed and the poor inhabitants of the new states failed to live up to the grand visions of nationalist ideologues. The Balkans today — including Greece — are the product of peasant movements that briefly caught the fever of nationalism during its early 20th century heydey. With significant Western European help these people threw off empire. In doing so however they also mostly annihilated the ethnic cosmopolitanism that was one of its hallmarks, expelling, killing or forcibly assimilating anyone who did not conform to the new national identity. The result is a more homogenous and in some ways drabber Eastern Europe than the colorful

diversity provided by the Hapsburgs or Ottomans at their best.

While much of the broad history was already known to me, the fascinating anecdotes and quotes that Mazower mined for this book were certainly not. He gives an adequate portrait of how the Balkan states came to be where they are and what they need to thrive in an increasingly(?) post-national 21st century world. A recommended read even for those familiar with the region's history.

Catherine says

This is a well-written, engaging, and concise history of the (political, social, religious) shifts in the Balkan region from the Ottoman Empire to the 1990s. It gives you enough to get a terrific overview of the complexity of the region, but it is not too pedantic or exhaustive in its discourses. The author is also good at illustrating, again in a straightforward manner, the ways in which the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Byzantine, and other, smaller, empires either discouraged or shaped the modern ideas of "nation" versus "nationality" in the Balkans. You can't help but think of similar regions in the world where people align their loyalties, not to nations, but to ethnicities, churches, or even classes. This is actually a pretty fun and easy read (I read it in two sittings!)- a nice mix of military, religious, cultural, social, and economic history.

Lauren Albert says

A good introduction to the incredibly complex and confusing history of the Balkans. But it really is just a starter at less than 125 pages. It whet my appetite to learn more but I probably couldn't have handled a longer history without knowing these basics first.

Bob H says

This is a concise history of the Balkans' tangled history, particularly recent centuries. We see how the Ottoman empire -- which once covered the area almost to Vienna itself -- would recede, and how the primitive nations of Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece would emerge. We learn how the Balkans' peculiar geography would shape and compartmentalize the ethnic groups, languages and societies, and how religion -- and convenient conversions -- would also shape the region.

The book is terse, almost telegraphic, skimming across centuries and a complex history. It would otherwise be a very long and convoluted book, but this is more of a summary. Its conclusions are reasonable, even illuminating, but it would require the reader to have at least some familiarity with the history. Given the recent conflicts in the region, and its past effect on Europe -- notably the flashpoint for World War I -- it's worth reading. The Modern Library edition is fairly well-illustrated with maps and a chronology, and well-footnoted.

Ellen says

This is one of my favorite history books, not just because Mazower is a master of concise, insightful writing

but because it's a wonderful counterweight to the Western-centric history we're taught in school. The book sheds light on the Ottoman Empire as a beacon of education and religious tolerance at a time when Catholic Europe was burning witches. The Sultan granted Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition asylum as well as freedom to practice their religion. The juxtaposition of diverse religions resulted in fascinating new cultural traditions. Muslim, Orthodox Christian and Jewish peasants living and working together typically practiced all three religions, attending services at the mosque, temple and church as a matter of insurance just in case their own religion turned out to be wrong. Bektashism, the worship of saints from all three religions, evolved out of this tolerance and openness to new ideas. A favorite quote: "Albanians will profess any religion that allows them to carry a gun." Women could improve their financial lot in life by leaving their peasant Christian husbands and marrying urban Muslims (the Christian marriage was considered annulled when these women converted to Islam), which perhaps explains why there is deep reverence for the Virgin Mary among Muslims today - because at one time they had Christian mothers. Constantinople was a clean, beautiful city at a time when Europeans lived without sanitation systems and it's fascinating to read about the city life of wealthy, educated Muslims versus peasant life in nomadic villages. This book delves into the tragic hubris of Western European powers which decided to "help" the Balkan people by forcing them to stop their nomadic sheep-herding lifestyle and adopt European farming traditions (despite the lack of fertile soil in the dry desert-like climate), which devastated the economy and the environment and set the stage for ethnic strife between families fighting over once-shared limited resources.

Lubinka Dimitrova says

Solid, clearly written and concise introduction to the region. The chapters, while assembling information on the history and region chronologically, also provide thematic studies on religious life, national identity, crime, politics and the effects of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans.

The author debunks the myth that ethnic and religious differences alone are to blame for the current chaos in the region by pointing out that for hundreds of years, the many religions and ethnic groups of the region lived side by side in relative harmony. The now fragmented Balkans were once part of the Roman and Ottoman empires, and until relatively recent times, enjoyed a semblance of stability. It wasn't until the last century when nationalistic and ethnic ambitions surfaced (with the encouragement of the Great Powers) that things turned ugly.

All in all, an excellent read.

Michael Kotsarinis says

A short but concise book on Balkan history, very useful for everyone wishing to get the broad picture of the area and its history. It focuses on people and politics highlighting their evolution as societies and states without sentimentalism and prejudice commonly found in other books.

Caleb.Lives says

Little more than apologia for Ottoman empire, with the amount of bias and selective presentation of info that would probably put even the most nationalistically-bent Turkish historians to shame.

Tim says

In this small volume Mazower does not provide a full history of every Balkan nation, but instead provides an overview beginning with geography and spending time with Ottoman rule, the Orthodox church, growing nationalism in the 19th century (for Mazower a poison from the West), and war, communism, and modernity in the 20th century. I might wish for more criticism of the Ottomans (where is discussion of the Janissaries?) and a less political discussion of the church, but this book is packed with insights about local life and political order and is beautifully written. His history of 20th century Europe, *The Dark Continent*, was a brooding, dense and wonderful book. The prose here is easier and the author's real love of the topic shines through.
