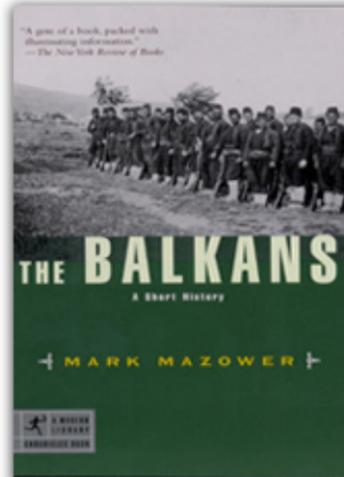


# Book Review

*By James Pettifer*

## *The Balkans*

*Mark Mazower*



TLS

# The new Eastern Question

In his book *Dart Continent: Europe's twentieth century* (reviewed in the *TLS*, June 15, 1998), Mark Mazower effectively restructured the perceptions of a generation, and in many ways *The Balkans* is a companion volume, for what many people would regard as the even darker region to the south-east. It is short, only 130 pages, and the first reaction on opening it is that Professor Mazower has set himself an impossible task. But this is not the case, and this fine book is likely to be a seminal work in both academia and among the large numbers of diplomats, soldiers, spies, journalists and "international community" staff who occupy the capitals of the region as much as in the days of the Eastern Question. Cynics about the Balkans, who are not in short supply at the moment, might say that it does not matter very much what these people read, as their pre-1914 efforts achieved the First World War, and latterly, post-1990, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the forced displacement of millions.

It is, in its way, a very American volume, a product of Mazower's time at Princeton University (he is now Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London) and its real target, in so far as it has one, is clearly the "timeless ethnic conflict and ancestral hatreds" school of thought which dominated many American and some European perceptions after the publication of Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* (1993). By encouraging its readers to ignore recent history, that book was influential in the gross policy mistakes of the early Clinton period, where the

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THE BALKANS

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region was generally as an evil morass, unworthy of intervention, coupled with sentimental and uncritical admiration for the occasional "good guy" country, usually Croatia, which was seen as extracting itself from "the Balkans" (bad) towards "Europe" (good), even if this meant US collusion with massive acts of violence and ethnic cleansing. With his masterly grasp of recent Greek history, and slightly less authoritative but generally sure hold on the history of Balkan neighbours, Mazower shows that Balkan society has not always existed in a backward time warp, and that many Balkan societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were actually much less violent than their "Enlightened" and "Western" European neighbours "Europe" itself, as his companion volume shows, has little to be proud of in many respects.

Many negative perceptions of the region can be traced back ultimately to the propaganda of the papal imperialists who sponsored the Crusades, and the same forces are at work even now in attempting to show that Croatia and Slovenia are European,

whereas places like Serbia and Bulgaria are not. Religion is at the heart of many Balkan dilemmas, and an outstanding aspect of this book is the clear-headed account of the role of the respective churches, synagogues and mosques in ethno-nationalism. Mazower is generally scrupulously fair to the different faiths and nationalities, and while admiring multicultural Jewish Salonika, is not blind to its faults. The same might be said of his description of the rise of the nation state within the late Ottoman world, which is likely to be the standard general introduction to the subject for a long time. He is excellent at bringing to life social and economic conditions at the time of independence, when Serbia was little more than a wilderness of thick forests inhabited by pigkeepers, but perhaps a little gentle on Greece.

Although Mazower makes clear that many Macedonian peasants feared the Greek imperial clerk more than his Ottoman soldier boss, he does not quite bring home the rapacious greed and speculation of many Greek officials and capitalists of the type that drove Bulgarian and Macedonian peasants into the arms of the terrorist International Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, IMRO. On some countries he is not as up to date as others; the most recent volume in the bibliography on Macedonia was published in 1906, on Albania, 1967. He sees Albanians as the most nationalist of the Balkan peoples. Is this fair? It may seem so at the moment, after NATO's bombing of Kosovo and with economic cantonization of the FYROM taking place. But in the past decade, Greek public opinion over Macedonia has been entrenched. Serbs were applauding the carnage at Vukovar, and Croats were ethnically cleansing the Krin region. The

degree to which ethno-nationalism is expressed in action depends a great deal on external factors. At the moment they happen to favour the Albanians, as the giant US-military constructions going up in Kosovo, the largest built abroad since the Vietnam war, show. But this could change.

Ethno-nationalism is not a uniquely Balkan phenomenon, although the Europeanists in the foreign-policy establishments continually imply it is. Where would the IRA - or Irish nationalism generally - be without the US connection? At the moment, Montenegrin nationalism is "good", Croatia is "European", and Kosovo is supposed to become an autonomous part of a democratized Yugoslavia. Whether these terms mean anything, or whether the diplomatic discourse involved has any connection with practical events is, of course, the key issue. To take a single fact, about two-thirds of Croatian GDP is currently taken up with the defence, security, intelligence and police budgets. This would not appear to be an immediate qualification for European Union membership. In Kosovo, post-June 1999, every single Albanian political leader has come out firmly for independence, although the "international community" persists in talking about a future for Kosovo within Yugoslavia.

The unfortunate fact is that policies can only work if they are founded on what is actually happening, which in turn is determined by objective historical factors that are not of anyone's choosing. Mark Mazower's great achievement in this book is to make very clear what many of those factors are; in a restrained way, *The Balkans* is likely to be a subversive book for the more complacent policy-makers, particularly the Europeanist establishment. It will encourage people to ask awkward, but relevant questions, and to think clearly. It will also lead to much productive future research and scholarship, as well as being an excellent introduction to the region for the general reader.