
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE BALKANS

"The countries with which this book deals—Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania—are not major powers; their resources are not of critical importance to the United States. American interests in the Balkan region appear to be minimal.

"But all of us have seen half a dozen movies in which the idyllic peace and quiet of an early 20th-century American home are interrupted by the announcement that in the Balkans an Austrian Archduke has been assassinated, an announcement to which nobody pays attention. In the next sequence on the screen the hero is invariably waist-deep in the mud of Flanders, and the shells are whistling overhead.

"Since 1914, we [Americans] have slowly and painfully been coming to realize that, baffling as they seem, Balkan politics necessarily involve us."

So writes historian Robert Lee Wolff in his masterly **The Balkans in Our Time** (Harvard, rev. ed., 1974, cloth; Norton, rev. ed., 1978, paper), which concentrates on the period since World War I but provides an illuminating 100 pages of historical background.

Wolff sketches not only the modern history of the four nations in the central Balkans but also, when necessary, that of the four countries on the region's periphery, portions of which are still "Balkan" in character and may once have been Balkan in name. He forays into economics, religion, culture, education, and the arts—noting, for example, how postwar Communist regimes doctored the plays of Shakespeare. ("A little judicious editing transformed the Montagues and Capulets into exploiting reactionary capitalists.")

As far as the Balkans are concerned, this is the one book to read if you are reading only one.

Unfortunately, the volume is 10 years out of date. Barbara Jelavich's dry but comprehensive two-volume **History of the Balkans** (Cambridge, 1983, cloth and paper) covers much of Wolff's terrain and brings the story forward to the 1980s. She details the events of the turbulent 18th and 19th centuries, when many of the Balkan peoples experienced a "national awakening" and began agitating for independence.

They usually achieved it, Jelavich notes, with the connivance of one or more of the Great Powers, and with mixed results. "Once the gunsmoke and the clouds of glory have faded away the net result will remain," observed one Russian during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, "that is to say enormous losses, a deplorable financial situation, and what advantages? Our Slav brothers freed, who will astonish us with their ingratitude."

Neither Wolff nor Jelavich lavishes much attention on the 2,000-year span when the Balkan peninsula was subject to the rule of Romans, Greeks, and Turks. Two books fill the gap: George Ostrogorsky's **The Byzantine State** (Beck, 1940; Rutgers, rev. ed., 1969) and Lord John Kinross's **The Ottoman Centuries** (Morrow, 1977, cloth; 1979, paper). Both are highly readable and amply illustrated.

As for nontechnical studies of individual Balkan countries, the pickings in English are slim (except on Yugoslavia), and often out of print. Much of what does appear on U.S. library shelves consists of translations of official works recently published in So-

fia, Belgrade, Bucharest, or Tiranë. They lack a certain credibility, as they depict the "conflict between socialist enlightenment and religion" or describe work as "the best anvil for forging the new socialist mentality."

Nevertheless, there *are* some useful volumes by Westerners. R. W. Seton-Watson's standard **History of the Roumanians** (Cambridge, 1934; Archon, 1963) ends with the 1920s. Stephen Fischer-Galati's **Twentieth-Century Rumania** (Columbia, 1970) takes the tangled story from there. The best overall treatment of Enver Hoxha's Stalinist paradise on the Adriatic probably remains **The People's Republic of Albania** (Johns Hopkins, 1968, cloth, out of print; 1968, paper), by Nicholas C. Pano. And the land of the Bulgars, past and present, is treated in Mercia Macdermott's **History of Bulgaria, 1393-1885** (Praeger, 1962, out of print) and Joseph Rothschild's **The Communist Party of Bulgaria** (AMS Press, 1976).

A useful listing of more than 30 of the better books on Yugoslavia—by writers as diverse as Milovan Djilas, George F. Kennan, Fitzroy Maclean, and Adam Ulam—can be found in the bibliography of Dusko Doder's vivid, popular **The Yugoslavs** (Random, 1978, cloth; 1979, paper).

Doder emphasizes the differences among Yugoslavia's four main ethnic groups—from the "sober, discreet" Slovenes and "moody"

Macedonians to the "urbane, self-possessed" Croats and "authoritarian, talkative" Serbs.

But all of them, he writes, especially the intellectuals, "are prone to dwell upon the real or fictitious glories in their history, conveniently ignoring the painful fact that their ancestors had lived for centuries in what could only be described as a cultural and political void."

Some of the best writing about the Balkans was done before World War II by British travelers, such as Rebecca West in **Black Lamb, Grey Falcon** (Viking, 1943, cloth, out of print; 1983, paper), and by amateur sociologists, such as Irwin T. Sanders (who was a U.S. agricultural attaché in Bulgaria during the 1930s). Sanders's **Balkan Village** (Kentucky, 1949; Greenwood, 1975) portrays a peasant culture in transition, its traditional values and customs undermined by new schools, new roads, new forms of entertainment, and other encroachments of modern civilization.

"Whenever I wanted to stir up a lively discussion," Sanders writes, "I could rely on one question to do the trick: 'Was life better 50 years ago than today?' The oldest person usually led off; after that the discussion became a verbal free-for-all. . . ."

"Perhaps the village drunk spoke words of wisdom when he finally got the attention of the group long enough to say: 'Everything is better but it is also more difficult.'"



EDITOR'S NOTE: Some of the titles in this essay were suggested by Wilson Center librarian Zdeněk V. David. Interested readers may wish to consult WQ's Background Books essay on Yugoslavia (Spring '78).