

Noel Malcolm. **Kosovo, a short history.** (London: MacMillan 1998). ISBN 0-333-66612-7. 491 pp.

Within the space of one year, three major works have appeared in English on the long-neglected subject of Kosovo. They are: the 600-page reader *Kosovo, in the heart of the powder keg* (East European Monographs, New York 1996) by the present reviewer; the long-awaited 328-page *Between Serbs and Albanians, a history of Kosovo* (Hurst, London 1998) by historian Miranda Vickers, author of *Muslim Albania, a modern history* (Taurus, London 1994); and Noel Malcolm's present *Kosovo, a short history* (London 1998). As such, the international reader can finally begin to come to terms with this once most obscure region of southeastern Europe, which has now been hitting the front pages of the news on an almost daily basis.

Noel Malcolm (b. 1956), historian and political columnist for the Daily Telegraph in London, has published works in an interesting variety of fields and is no newcomer to the Balkans. His very well received monograph *Bosnia, a short history* (London 1994), like the present one, was published just at the right time.

The present volume is the most lucid and scholarly history of Kosovo ever to have appeared in a non-Balkan language, and perhaps in any language. The 356 pages of text are enhanced by eight maps (p. xvii-xxv), an introduction (p. xxvii-xxxvi), copious endnotes (p. 357-427), a glossary (p. 428-430), a list of manuscripts (p. 431-434) a substantial bibliography (p. 435-473) and an index (p. 474-491).

Malcolm's monograph traces the history of Kosovo and the southern Balkans from earliest times to the present, critical age. In his lucid and balanced introduction, the author stresses the obvious elements about the current (1997) crisis in Kosovo. Although, as has often been repeated, "the Yugoslav crisis began in Kosovo, and it will end in Kosovo," this crisis is by no means simply an "ethnic conflict created by the bubbling up of obscure but virulent ethnic hatreds among the local populations," since this ignores "the primary role of politicians (above all, the Serbian nationalist-communist Slobodan Milosevic) in creating conflict at the political level" (p. xxvii). He notes that in one sense, "a history of Kosovo has to be defined by questions projected back into the past from the political conditions of the late twentieth century" (p. xxxiv), since Kosovo has only been a geopolitical unit of territory (dare one say country?) for the last few decades. Even if this were not the case, an objective view of Kosovo has long been lacking because many of the aspects of its history "have also been widely misrepresented, thanks to the national or ideological preconceptions of modern historians. Arguments about the 'ethnogenesis' of the Albanians or the Romanians are notoriously subject to such distortions" (p. xxxv). The essence of the problem, as is evident from the introduction and throughout the book, are Serb myths and misconceptions about their own history and role in Kosovo.

After an introductory, though indispensable 'Orientation: places, names and peoples' (p. 1-21), chapter 2 'Origins: Serbs, Albanians and Vlachs' (p. 22-40) provides an essential overview of the arrival of the Slavs in the Balkan peninsula and their invasion of Kosovo (547-548 AD), on the mediating role played by the residual Latin-speaking population of the Balkans in the form of the Romanians and, for the southwestern Balkans in particular, the Vlachs or Aromanians, and on the various theories of Albanian ethnogenesis. Malcolm sees the uplands of the Kosovo area as crucial to the development of the Albanian-Vlach (Romanian) symbiosis (p. 40). Chapter 3, 'Medieval Kosovo before Prince Lazar, 850s-1380s' (p. 41-57) attempts to shed light on the most obscure period of the Balkan dark ages.

The author outlines the increasing geographical significance of Kosovo for the Serbian Nemanjid dynasty, which arose in Rascia and later had its power base in Skopje. He also surveys the first Serb records of the existence of the native Albanian population in

Kosovo, a thorny and controversial issue in the Balkans, concluding, “Albanians have certainly had a continuous presence in this region, but all the evidence suggests that they were only a minority in medieval Kosovo” (p. 57).

‘The Battle and the Myth’ (p. 58-80) deals with the key event of early Kosovo history, the historic Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389, which pitted Christian forces against the invading hordes of Islam and led to over five centuries of Ottoman rule in the southern Balkans. Much ink has flown since the Battle of Kosovo Polje, in particular by nineteenth-century Serb authors for whom the event entered the realms of mythology. Malcolm traces the events and endeavours, to the extent possible, to distinguish between legend and historical reality. He concludes rightly that, independent of actual events, it is indeed the legend of Kosovo Polje among the Serbs that has had the greatest historical significance. Quoting Batakovic, he concludes with a vein of irony, “The Kosovo covenant - the choice of freedom in the celestial world instead of humiliation and slavery in the temporal world -... is still the one permanent connective tissue that imbues the Serbs with the feeling of national entity” (p. 80).

Chapters 5-7, ‘The last years of medieval Serbian Kosovo: 1389-1455,’ (p. 81-92), ‘Early Ottoman Kosovo: 1450s-1580s’ (p. 93-115) and ‘War, rebellion and religious life: 1580s-1680s’ (p. 116-138), trace the transition of rule from the kingdom of the Orthodox Serbs to the political predominance of Islam and evince the continuity of cultures and values in the region from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Among the many colourful figures of early seventeenth-century revolt was Sultan Jahja (1585-1649), whom Malcolm revives to memory. Also of interest is his treatment of the various currents of faith: Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Crypto-Christianity, Islam and the dervish orders, which all helped crystalize forms of identity in the southern Balkans.

The late seventeenth century gave witness to two events which are traditionally thought to have been of cataclysmic significance for Kosovo: the Austro-Turkish war of 1683-1699 and the resultant, so-called great exodus of the Serbs from Kosovo to the north. The author steers a moderate course between the opposing maximal claims of Serb and Albanian historians in this chapter, which he entitles ‘The Austrian invasion and the Great Migration of the Serbs: 1689-1690’ (p. 139-162), and comes to the conclusion that, although many Serbs fled all parts of the south (not just Kosovo), their numbers have been very much exaggerated by subsequent historians, and that the role of Catholic Albanians and pro-Austrian Muslims in this uprising against Turkish rule has been neglected.

Chapter 9, ‘Recovery and decline: 1690-1817’ (p. 163-180) outlines a century of stagnation in war-ravaged Kosovo. While the Orthodox Patriarchate was in full decline, Ottoman repression of the Catholic and Crypto-Catholic Albanian population continued unabated as periodic fighting between the Hapsburg Empire and the Porte dragged on. Chapter 10, ‘Reform and resistance: 1817-1878’ (p. 181-201), demonstrates that the popular version of nineteenth-century Balkan history of a people struggling for freedom under the backward and autocratic Ottoman yoke is superficial and misleading. Indeed the Porte introduced a number of progressive reforms, admittedly diluted by the time they reached Kosovo, which were combatted by the indigenous population of southern Balkans in order to allow local potentates to preserve their privileges. Both the Serbs and the Albanians, the latter with understandable delay inter alia due to their conversion to Islam, were now in a process of national revival, increasingly marked ethnic identification and separate nation-forming, which paved the way to the present conflict. Though the Albanians were initially less visible to historians, Malcolm states with good conviction that “the population of Kosovo contained an absolute majority of Albanian-speakers over Slav-speakers in the mid-nineteenth century” (p. 196).

Chapter 11, ‘Kosovo’s other minorities: Vlachs, Gypsies, Turks, Jews and Circassians’ (p. 202-216), forms a necessary interlude in the historical narrative and provides interesting coverage of the ethnic diversity of Kosovo in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries beyond the dichotomy of Albanian-Serb relations.

By contrast, political events take to the fore once again in chapters 12 and 13: 'From the League of Prizren to the Young Turk revolution: 1878-1908' (p. 217-238) and 'The great rebellions, the Serbian conquest and the First World War: 1908-1918' (p. 239-263). The Albanian national movement, which crystalized in the League of Prizren as a reaction to the Congress of Berlin of 1878, was now in full swing and culminated, eventually, in the independence of Albania proper in 1912. Malcolm rejects the traditionalist view of the Albanian national movement as a "single political force, at once historically continuous, socially cohesive and ideologically consistent" (p. 217), and endeavours rather to analyse the various forces and political projects at work within it. Muslim Albanians initially welcomed the liberal-minded constitution of the Young Turks of 1908 but were soon to be deceived, whereas the Serbs regarded it from the start as the "frustration of all their schemes... as it would prevent the creation of Great Serbia" (p. 240). The Albanian national movement, born in Kosovo, was, however, too embryonic to hinder the tragic loss of Kosovo, which was invaded and conquered by Serbian and Montenegrin forces on the eve of Albanian independence. The horrors of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and the accounts of genocide which seeped out of Kosovo with the help of Leo Freundlich (1913) and the Carnegie report of the International Commission' (1913, reprint 1993) are chilling indeed. The chaos of the First World War in Kosovo, Austrian and Bulgarian occupation and the retreat of the defeated Serbian Army through the Albanian Alps are all recounted in moving detail.

The history of modern Kosovo can be said to begin with its incorporation into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the forerunner of modern Yugoslavia. Chapter 14, 'Kaçaks and colonists: 1918-1941' (p. 264-288), outlines life in Kosovo, now firmly under the rule of Belgrade. The period is characterized by campaigns to marginalize and criminalize the majority Albanian population and to colonize the province with Serbs from outside the province. The result of Belgrade's efforts before the Second World War was indeed the creation of a classical colonial state. Of particular long-term interest is Malcolm's position on the much-repeated argument that Kosovo is legally and therefore must remain part of Yugoslavia or Serbia. He demonstrates that there is no foundation to this view from the point of view of international law. Malcolm asserts and provides evidence that, although regarded de facto as an integral part of Serbia, Kosovo "had never been legally incorporated into the Serbian state" (p. 264)... "Some might wish to argue that, even if the correct procedures were not followed so far as Serbia's internal constitutional requirements were concerned, nevertheless the territories were properly annexed in terms of international law under the treaty-making powers of the king. But the strange truth is that Kosovo was not legally incorporated into Serbia by the standards of international law either" (p. 264-265). His analysis of Kosovo's legal status under international law is of major significance for the situation today, given the current determination of the people of Kosovo for freedom and independence from Belgrade.

Kosovo under various forms of occupation during World War II is dealt with in chapter 15, 'Occupied Kosovo in the Second World War, 1941-1945' (p. 289-313). In the spring of 1941, Kosovo was partitioned among the occupants: Germany, Italy and Bulgaria. Soon thereafter, the Italians, who had received the lion's share, amalgamated their portion of Kosovo with the Kingdom of Albania (which they had under their control anyway). The Kosovo Albanians themselves were primarily interested in ridding themselves of the great numbers of Serbian and Montenegrin colonists who had taken their land, and took advantage of the situation to remove or expel as many of them as possible. An estimated 20,000 colonists fled and 10,000 houses were burnt down (p. 294) in a tit-for-tat act of revenge against the Serbs who had earlier driven the Albanians into the highlands. Malcolm also analyses the reasons for the lack of Albanian support for the nascent Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which had ventured to maintain a comparatively open-minded stance with regard

to their national concerns. In this connection, he has taken advantage of information which has only recently come to light in Balkan archives concerning the extent of Yugoslav influence over the formation of the Albanian Communist party.

Concluding chapters 16 and 17, 'Kosovo under Tito: 1945-1980' (p. 314-333) and 'Kosovo after the death of Tito: 1981-1997' (p. 334-356), chronicle the history of Kosovo under Communist and Serbian nationalist rule up to 1997 and provide a lucid analysis of events which could lead in no other direction than towards the current fin-de siècle apocalypse. In his final remarks, written in the summer of 1997, six months before the outbreak of the conflict, Noel Malcom notes, "Quite simply, Serbia had already lost Kosovo - lost it, that is, in the most basic human and demographic terms... Whether Kosovo is brought, in the end, to a peaceful solution, or plunged into a conflict potentially even more deadly than that which was created in Bosnia, will depend to a large extent on the ability of ordinary Serbs to challenge the fixed pattern of thought which has held them in its grip for so long... When ordinary Serbs learn to think more rationally and humanely about Kosovo, and more critically about some of their national myths, all the people of Kosovo and Serbia will benefit - not least the Serbs themselves" (p. 355-356).

All in all, Noel Malcolm's *Short History of Kosovo* is an excellent, balanced and highly informative account of the history of a tragic region which, should it survive the present apocalypse, may, or may not, emerge as the youngest nation of Europe.

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