

Miranda Vickers. *Albania, a modern history*. I. B. Tauris. London & New York. 1995. Revised paperback edition 1997. ISBN 1-86064-323-X. 262 pp.

Western readers interested in Albanian history have had a hard time of it. The only work available on the market in English until recently was *The history of Albania from its origins to present day* (London & Boston 1981), edited by Tirana historians Stefanaq Pollo (1923-1997) and Arben Puto, and translated from the French *Histoire de l'Albanie des origines à nos jours* (Roanne 1974). Written under the Enver Hoxha dictatorship, it conveyed a simplistic and uncritical account of events, conforming to the needs of communist and nationalist ideology in Albania, i.e. a small revolutionary people struggling for freedom against a series of evil invaders and foreign occupants. Although its Marxist approach was toned down substantially for the foreign reader, this 'standard history' veiled historical realities with much popular and political legendry and included almost all the sacred cows of Albanian historiography.

Within the space of one year, however, three new Albanian histories have appeared on the Western market, which now enable the interested reader to gain a more objective overview of the sufferings and the achievements of the Albanian people over the past few centuries. Of these, the 768-page *The Albanians, an ethnic history from prehistoric times to the present* (Jefferson NC 1995) by the one-time American missionary Edwin Jacques (1908-1996) is the most monumental. It is full of information, but extremely conformist in approach and is based in dubious sources. Much more satisfactory is the German-language *Albanien, vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Regensburg 1995) by Munich historian Peter Bartl. The third work, *Albania, a modern history* under review here, is, nonetheless, the book destined to enjoy the widest diffusion among Western readers and, as such, it is to our good fortune that British scholar Miranda Vickers has provided us here with a sound and reliable account of Albania's development over the past hundred years.

The volume begins with a *Preface* (p. vii-viii), a short *Glossary* of terms (p. ix-x), three *Maps* (p. xi-xiii) and an *Introduction* (p. 1-10), the latter providing a survey of Albanian history up until the Turkish conquest of the early fifteenth century. In fact, although Albania as a land is ancient, there is not a good deal to be said about the history of the Albanian people until this period. Both the Albanians and their country first take on a clear physiognomy during the five centuries in which they formed part of the Ottoman Empire. These centuries are dealt with accordingly in chapters 1 and 2: *The nature of Ottoman rule and the rise of the Great Pashaliks* (p. 11-31) and *Political and cultural moves to consolidate the Albanian national movement* (p. 32-52). From the start, Vickers makes it clear that the traditional Albanian view of the Ottoman Empire needs revision, based as it is primarily on Albania's bitter experience as a colonial victim of an Empire in decay in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. "Up until the end of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman state was remarkably tolerant towards its diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual population... Catholic and Muslim societies lived side by side in relative peace" (p. 11). Chapter 3, *Albanian independence and the end of Ottoman rule* (p. 53-76), offers a lucid and balanced account of the complex situation the Albanians encountered in their struggle for autonomy and independence. Though they were Muslims in their great majority, the Albanians were substantially worse treated by the Sublime Porte with regard to the affirmation of their national identity and culture than were the Christian peoples of the Balkans (Greeks, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bulgarians etc.) who had their own native schools and could use their own languages for books and publications. Nonetheless, the Albanians were more fearful of the designs of their Christian neighbours than they were of the Turks and, following the old

dogma "Better the Devil you know" (p. 67), almost always fought on the side of the Empire against the 'liberation' forces of the Greeks, Montenegrins and Serbs, who were bent on driving the Turks out of Europe and... on partitioning Albania among themselves.

The fact that little Albania managed to gain its independence in such a constellation of hostile Balkan powers, and retain its sovereignty up to the present day is still grounds for admiration. The overwhelming political difficulties faced by the nascent Albanian State are well reviewed in chapters 3, 4 and 5: *The reign of Prince Wied and the First World War* (p. 77-97), *Political instability and the June Revolution* (p. 98-116) and *The consolidation of Zogu's regime and the Italian ascendancy* (p. 117-140).

The next great turning-point in Albanian history, after that of independence, came in the wake of the Second World War with the seizure of power by the communists under Enver Hoxha (1908-1985). Vickers covers the main stages and events in the rise and fall of Albanian Stalinism in chapters 7, 8 and 9: *The Second World War and the founding of the Albanian Communist Party* (p. 141-162), *'Building Socialism' under Yugoslav and Soviet tutelage* (p. 163-184) and *The retreat into isolation* (p. 185-209). Our knowledge of the social and political history of the communist period is still based to a good extent on outside observation, and much remains to be researched about the inner workings of the country during the half a century it withdrew from Planet Earth. Vickers has, nonetheless, provided accurate coverage to the extent of our knowledge at the moment.

The communist dictatorship in Albania, the most severe and at the same time most surrealistic regime ever to have held power in a European country, finally expired in 1990. The early years of the painful return up to chaotic meltdown of 1997 are described in chapters 10 and 11: *The end of communism and the path to democratic pluralism* (p. 210-234) and *The democratic 'dream' fades* (p. 235-253), the latter chapter to be found only in the revised 1997 edition. The legacy of forty-six years of 'splendid isolation' under Marxist-Leninist rule seems to have bequeathed the country with little more than universal misery and a sub-Saharan economy. When one-party rule was finally done away with, there was virtually no intellectual leadership left to fill the void. Albanian culture was in ruins and there was little infrastructure for a fresh start. The nineties have thus found the Albanian nation in a state of political and economic chaos which has continued unabated up to the present day. Notes (p. 255-268), Bibliography (p. 269-273) and an Index (p. 274-280) conclude the volume.

Miranda Vickers' eminently readable *The Albanians, a modern history* provides the most accurate and reliable account of modern Albanian history ever to have been written in English and can be recommended without reserve both to students of history and to the general public. The shortcomings of the book are insignificant and more of a technical nature. There is a certain inconsistency in the use of Albanian placenames: *Kruja* but *Lezhe* (p. 10) for Kruja and Lezha or Krujë and Lezhë, and a number of misspellings: *Girokaster* (p. 37) for Gjirokastër or Gjirokastra, *Cetinje* (p. 36) for Cetinje, *Premeti* (p. 92) for Përmeti, *Rozofat* (p. 19) for Rozafat, and *Beraria* (p. 58) no doubt for Berane. Personal names also appear with some inconsistencies and mistakes: *Skenderbeg* (p. 7) and *Skanderbeg* (p. 46), *Gjergi Fishta* (p. 42) for Gjergj Fishta, *Gjon Kastrioti* (p. 17) for Gjon Kastrioti or Castriotta, *Velqilharxhi* (p. 28) for Veqilharxhi, *Bajram Curri* (p. 91) for Bajram Curri, and *Skreli* (p. 40) for Shkreli. *Pir-evi* (p. 22) is not a placename but refers rather to the 'mother house' of the Bektashi monasteries. The bibliography is somewhat unreliable as it contains some titles quoted correctly in the language of publication and others quoted in a non-existent English translation. These technical problems do not distract in any way, however, from the overall positive value and reliable nature of the text.

In covering Miranda Vickers' work on Albanian history, mention must also be made of her second volume, written together with James Pettifer: *Albania, from anarchy to Balkan identity* (London 1997), which provides a more detailed overview of the post-communist

period from 1990 to early 1997, and of her informative *Between Serbs and Albanians, a history of Kosovo* (London 1998), which more than compensates for the unfortunate lack of information here on the tormented ‘other half’ of the Albanian nation.

Robert Elsie
Olzheim, Germany
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