

Ismail Kadare.

Tri këngë zie për Kosovën.

Tirana. Onufri. 1998. 89 pp. ISBN 99927-30-18-8. 300 ALL.

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Three elegies for Kosovo. Peter Constantine, tr.

London. Harvill Press. 2000. 87 pp. ISBN 1-86046-707-5. 6.99 GBP.

Nothing has been more central to the historical and emotional identity of the southern Balkans than the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. It was on June 28, St. Vitus Day, of that year that a coalition of Balkan forces made up of Serbs, Bosnians, Albanians and Romanians confronted an invading Ottoman army led by Sultan Mourad. Their defeat at the hands of the Turks led to five centuries of Ottoman rule and changed the face of the Balkans forever. The ghosts of Kosovo, where East meets West, where Europe meets the Third World, where the east-west axis of Islam meets the north-south axis of Eastern Orthodoxy, and where Slav meets non-Slav, have haunted the Balkans ever since.

In this slender volume, Ismail Kadare has assembled three of his tales about the Battle of Kosovo and its aftermath. The first, 'The Ancient Battle,' is a literary narrative of the circumstances of the battle in the author's mature style. Though the Turks were the obvious victors over the uneasy coalition of Christian forces, the Ottoman sultan himself perished during or shortly after the battle. "The bizarre decision that the monarch's body be taken to the Ottoman capital, but that his blood and intestines should be buried in the Christian soil of Kosovo, had a clear significance... By pouring the monarch's blood on the Plains of Kosovo, they wanted to give those plains, just as they had done with their invasion, a direction, a fatality, both a curse and blessing at the same time, in other words, a 'programme,' as one would call it today."

The second tale, 'The Great Lady,' views the defeat on the plains of Kosovo from the perspective of a group of minstrels, a Serb, an Albanian, a Walachian and a Bosnian, who had been summoned to the battlefield to play near the tent of Prince Lazar and who, caught up in the fighting, escape with the masses of Christian refugees fleeing from the victorious forces of Islam. The eternal message of the battle rings true when the Serb and Albanian minstrel friends attempt to explain their roles to a group of Hungarians they meet on their way: "It is a tangled matter. A Serb or Albanian can understand, but for you it would be too hard... For hundreds of years the evil persisted, what I mean is that Serbian and Albanian songs said the exact opposite from each other, particularly when it came to Kosovo, as each side claimed Kosovo was theirs. And each side cursed the other. And this lasted right up to the eve of the battle. Which was why the princes in the big tent laughed at the songs, for the princes had come together to fight the Turks while the minstrels were still singing songs against each other, the Serbs cursing the Albanians, and the Albanians the Serbs. And all the while, across the plain, the Turks were gathering to destroy them both the following day!"

The volume concludes with the short tale 'The Royal Prayer' in which the weary ghost of Sultan Mourad, apprehensive that his blood may be the origin of six hundred years of horror, prays to Allah for release. "Make them remove my blood from these cold plains. And not just the leaden vessel, but make them dig up the earth around where my tent stood, where drops of my blood spattered the ground."

Although the ‘Three Elegies for Kosovo’ have nothing directly to do with recent political events: the 1998-1999 Kosovo war and the final liberation of the long-suffering population, the very title of the book, and perhaps its modest size, have made it one of the most widely read and already the most widely translated book Ismail Kadare has ever written.

Robert Elsie
Olzheim / Eifel, Germany