

Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosova*. The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford, 2004. No. 44 in the series, *Historical Dictionaries of Europe*. ISBN 0-8108-5309-4, 288pp.

Robert Elsie is the world's English-language authority on Albanian literature, also a prolific writer on other aspects of Albanian life. His *Historical Dictionary of Kosova* provides an excellent source, supplying details, arranged alphabetically, of people, places, events and organizations of particular relevance to Kosova. Many entries may be easily expanded by checking the carefully chosen websites given at the end of those entries. The work is prefaced by a list of abbreviations and acronyms, a list of alternative place names and a list of political parties and organizations. There is also a list of Heads of Government and State for dates between 1953 and 2002 and a chronology from the time of Slavic settlement of Kosova dated at 547-548 right up to the last entry for 17th June, 2004 noting the arrest by UN police of about 270 people in connection with the rioting in mid-March of that year.

The introduction provides a history of Kosova, observing that it had fixed and recognized borders in the first millennium AD, as a part of the Roman Empire, even though it never constituted an independent state of its own. The short-lived period of Serb rule (1184-1216) brought Kosova into the medieval Serb Empire until the Ottoman expansion gradually took the whole of Kosova for 500 years. Under the Yugoslav government in the 1920s colonization brought about 70,000 Slavs (or one tenth of the total population) to the area, along with negotiations with the Turkish government to accept the deportation of thousands of Muslims. Under German occupation during World War II, Kosova was briefly united with Albania until Yugoslav partisans restored Serb administration. Although Tito promised to allow the people of Kosova

to make their democratic decision on whether to remain within Yugoslavia or to join Albania, the opportunity was never actually given, and with Albania's move towards extreme Stalinization, differences between the populations increased.

An early entry is the Albanological Institute (a research centre for Albanian studies in Prishtina, founded in 1953). For a people without diplomatic representation, this centre has served as a focus and meeting place. It features in many entries in the dictionary, as so many prominent figures have found solace, support and inspiration within its confines. It was occupied by Serb paramilitaries from 1994 (who violently expelled staff members), and re-opened in June 1999 after the departure of the Serb military and paramilitary forces. An entry on **Art** lists around 40 well known Kosovar artists, some of them Serb. It is noticeable both for artists and for poets and writers, that exposure in the form of exhibitions, etc. for Serb Kosovars under Yugoslavia, was much greater than for Albanian Kosovars.

The entry **Bektashi Order of Dervishes** clarifies the traditional tolerance and open minded attitude of Kosovar Muslims towards all other religions, including Christianity; this contrasts with the greater rigidity of Sunni Islam (for which there is no entry in the Dictionary), implying its very marginal importance in Kosova. On **Blood Feuding**, Elsie explains that it is still a means of exercising tribal justice in many regions of Kosova and Northern Albania, and that 'many of the tribes in northern Albania and Kosova were once virtually decimated by feuding'.(p.26). Mediation can be practised effectively, as by the folklorist, **Anton Çetta** (1920-95) who remarkably achieved success with over 900 blood feuds. Elsie gives an account of the life and work of **Pjetër Bogdani** (ca.1630-89) commenting on his immense theological treatise published in Padua in 1685. This 'is considered to be the masterpiece of early Albanian literature and ... the first work in Albanian of full

artistic and literary quality'.(p.28) **Flora Brovina** (1949-) is a remarkable human rights and women's rights activist, poet and paediatrician, whose fame became world-renowned when she was sentenced to twelve years in prison by a military court in Niš (Serbia), for 'collaboration for hostile activities in connection with terrorism under a state of martial law.' She served almost a year before returning to Kosova, and an active political career. Under **Catholicism**, we learn that the final break from Byzantine **Orthodoxy** came in 1054, although the Albanians of Kosova remained Catholic until the Ottoman conquest of the mid-fifteenth century, when, as Elsie explains, 'the majority of the Albanians ... converted to **Islam**, mostly for practical reasons' (p.36), although many also became **Crypto-Christians** (Catholic at home, but Muslim in public). He notes also that the Belgrade authorities 'tended to treat Catholic Albanians somewhat more leniently than they did Muslim Albanians'.(p.37) On the musical instrument the **çiftelia**, 'the epitome of folk music', Elsie might have mentioned that traditionally this is only played by men (and honorary men, e.g. 'sworn virgins').

Another national figure featured is **Adem Demaçi**, sometimes known as Kosova's Nelson Mandela, having spent 28 years as a political prisoner of the Belgrade regime from 1958. In 1991, he was awarded the Sahkarov Prize for his human rights work. Later he led the political wing of the **Kosova Liberation Army**. The travel writer/artist/anthropologist, **Mary Edith Durham** receives over a page relating to the second half of her life which she devoted to the cause of Albanians. In an entry for **Greater Albania**, Elsie explains that this term was first used by Mussolini in 1941, when he saw it as logical to include the Albanian-speaking regions of Kosova and Montenegro into Albania. He notes that the term has never been used by Albanians themselves, but rather it has been kept alive by those seeking to justify a Greater

Serbia. However, this is somewhat contradicted by his entry on the **People's Movement of Kosova** (1982-) in which he notes that in 'November 2003, it presented a petition ... to the parliament of Kosova for the reunification with Albania'.(p.138).

Elsie dates the arrival of the first **Jews** in Kosova (under the title **Jewish Minority in Kosova**), to have been in the fifteenth century. There is currently controversy over exactly how many were handed over by the Skanderbeg SS Division and who died in Bergen-Belsen. Elsie numbers it at 'at least 281' (p.86), whereas more recent claims put the number at as little as 32. Under K, I miss Jashar Kabashi, extraordinary linguist, and author of a book on English grammar, exhibiting knowledge that few native English-speakers could demonstrate. The scholar **Hasan Kaleshi** (1922-76) has made tremendous literary contributions. Controversially he has argued that the Turkish occupation of the Balkans had the positive consequence of saving them from ethnic assimilation by the Slavs. Under **Kosova War (1998-1999)**, Elsie clarifies that the conflict was less between the Serbs and Albanians of Kosova, than between the Kosova Albanian people and the Belgrade regime of Milošević. The last entry for the 10 pages under K, is **Albin Kurti** (1975-). The publication date of the Dictionary must have precluded comment on his major role, from at least that time, in the nonviolent political organization, **Vetëvendosje!** (No Negotiation!).

Elsie's specialty is Albanian **literature**, but here he condenses information on Kosovar literature in less than two pages, pointing out that the full cultural autonomy granted Kosova under the Yugoslav constitution of 1974, granted access to Albanian-language education and cultural facilities such as had never been available before, and that therefore there was particular flourishing of Albanian literature from the mid-1970s. On **mineral resources** attention is brought to the fact that Kosova has been a centre of mining since pre-Roman times, and that since World War II the **Trepça**

mines became one of the largest suppliers of lead and zinc in Europe – there is now controversy over its ownership. Mineral deposits at **Novobërda** facilitated the medieval Serbian Empire's prosperity, and continued to be mined for centuries. Under **museums** we learn that early in 1999, virtually all exhibits and collections from all museums in Kosova were confiscated and taken to Belgrade. At the time of publication, few of these had been returned, the Memorial Museum of the League of Prizren was razed to the ground in 1999, but has been rebuilt since.

Amongst a **population** of around two million (one third of which is under 15), the Dictionary tells us that 25,000 Albanian **newspapers**, published in Kosova, are sold daily, whereas the Serb minority relies entirely on newspapers from Serbia. The scholar, **Zymer Neziri** (b. 1946), is a leading expert on Albanian epic verse and is 'working to preserve the heritage of the last native singers of epic verse in Europe' (p.128). **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** merits an entry due to the major role it played in ending the increasing humanitarian catastrophe, culminating in 1999, caused by Belgrade's repression of the Kosova Albanians. 38,000 sorties were involved in the 78-day bombing campaign. The three peaks of **Mount Pashtrik** in the Has region on the Albania-Kosova border, have been considered holy since ancient times, by all three dominant **religions** of the region (Sunni Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholic). Elsie points out that traditional religious identity does not reflect actual religious affiliation and for example, that most Muslims in Kosova have never been inside a mosque. **Bedri Bey Pejani** (1885-1946) was a political figure. Under German occupation, he was one of those responsible for the ethnic cleansing of around 20,000 Serbs from Kosova in 1944. The politician, **Hasan Bey Prishtina** (1873-1933) was instrumental in the uprisings in Kosova in 1910-11 that finally led to the declaration of independence for Albania. He participated in the Paris Peace

Conference of 1919, two year later he took part in a coup d'etat and led further uprisings against Ahmet Zogu (who later proclaimed himself **King Zog**). Each attempted to assassinate the other. Zog won, when Hasan bey was murdered.

The **Return Coalition** is a Serb political organization which insists on the return of all Serbs who left Kosova after the 1998-1999 War, to Kosova. The UN Interim Administrative Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) gave an extra ten seats for the Serb minority (which apparently reached an all-time low at the beginning of the 20th century) to the Kosovar parliament with the intention of gaining Serb participation in the governing of Kosova, and ensuring that Albanian political parties could not monopolize power. Page 162, by chance gives an interesting juxtaposition of **Saint Sava** (ca. 1175-1235), now revered as the patron saint of Serbia with **Scanderbeg** (1405-1468), the Albanian prince and national hero.

The **uprising of 1981**, which started with a student protest against their miserable living conditions is explained in detail, since they were to lead to brutality and oppression for the following eighteen years until the 1998-1999 War. During much of the period 1981-99, Kosova was closed to the outside world.

A note, preceding the **Bibliography** (which is about one third of the book – almost 100 pages), points out that very few Western publications on Kosova deal with aspects other than the 1998-1999 War and the problems relating to it. Few, even of the political analysts had any background knowledge before expounding their expertise. Elsie comments that since ‘Scholarship at the service of nationalist propaganda is a Balkan specialty’, the bibliography includes many works which he would not consider recommended reading, but he includes them to allow readers to make up their own minds about historical fact. The single book on the history of Kosova which he recommends without reservation, is Noel Malcolm’s *Kosovo: A Short History*,

which has been translated into both Albanian and BCS (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian). He cites three further works with ‘good coverage of the 1998-99 war and its aftermath’, and comments on the ‘glaring lack of modern publications in the fields of economy, industry, finance and trade’, also noting that this may be understood for a ‘country that is not yet a country’. The **Bibliography** is divided into eight categories.

It seems unnecessary to have such comments as ‘sadly’, and ‘alas’ alongside accounts of the damage to a 14th century church, and the burning down of oriental style homes (145) and ‘alas’ again for the bypassing of Fushë Kosova, of the first railway line through Kosova (in 1874) (p.150). Another minor drawback is the fact that the list of Heads of Government and State is quickly outdated, while most of the rest of the information will remain highly relevant for a long time. Throughout, the Dictionary details municipalities: population statistics (from 1991 – long before the major population shifts of the later 1990s) and their bordering municipalities are given. It would be a lot easier to compare sizes and statistics if all this information were placed on a single map. Despite these minor glitches, and the fact that the focus of events relates predominantly to the last 20 years, this is an extremely objective reference work, whose useful information will be lasting.

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