

Anna Di Lellio, *The Battle of Kosovo 1389*, with parallel translation of the songs by Robert Elsie, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2009. pp. 199.

The epic story of the Battle of Kosovo, termed by some an ethno-nationalist myth, has been widely held as Serbian proof of ownership of Kosovo. Anna Di Lellio has now made a very careful study of the Albanian version of the story. Following her recent edited book, *The Case for Kosova: Passage to Independence* (2006), exploring centuries of historical background which led to Kosovo's independence in 2008, it is easy to see how this work placed di Lellio in close contact with the present subject, through the eyes of, and collaboration with so many other authoritative writers whose work she brought together.

The present attractively presented, slim, but dense volume contains two parts, the first recording the story/history of Sultan Murat, whom Di Lellio describes as 'a Moses-like leader who performs miracles for his people' (p.3). The justification for this comment can be seen in seven of the eight Albanian epic songs recorded in the second part of the book. These refer to Sultan Murat creating a path through the sea for his army. There are other similarities to biblical events related in the songs. All the songs (printed in both Albanian and English), passed down through centuries, which are published in the second half of the book were sung or recorded between 1923 and 1998.

Di Lellio is very measured in the presentation of her research. Without negating the much more widely known (Serbian) version of the story of the Battle of Kosovo, she presents a very different picture, seen from the Albanian perspective. Research reveals that any written record of the events was delayed for at least a century after the Battle took place. These were Ottoman records, translated into Latin

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a further century later, with again another century before interpretation was made of the translation.

The poems published here form ‘a historiography of the past’ for a people who were never permitted to write their own history. Most recently, documentation of Albanian records of the Battle, under the Milošević regime were destroyed, and singers of the epic songs militarily targeted. Even now these revelations have come as a shock to many around the world, and particularly in Serbia. Di Lellio observes that there is no historical evidence to confirm the ethnic identity of Murat’s assassin; her intention is to focus on the little known Albanian epic poetry, as a hitherto neglected voice. In this way she sees her research as a ‘democratic project’ (p.5). She discusses the ambivalence over time, of Albanian national discourse towards Islam, noting recent ‘overwhelming concern with defining the Albanian nation as Western and Christian’ (p.9). Such concern has been shared by many well known Albanian writers: Sami Frashëri in the 19th century, and more recently Ibrahim Rugova and Ismail Kadare to name only a few. She also notes the scant attention given to the Battle of Kosovo by the Hoxha regime in Albania, where Gjergj Kastriot (Skanderbeg) was celebrated as defender against Ottoman incursion—and retains his heroic status in Albania today. There is discussion also of the Serbian portrayal of the Battle, pointing out the huge influence it has had in popular culture, folk songs, literary texts and political speeches.

1389 became far more widely significant during the lead up to the 1999 Kosovo War. Milošević made huge political gain through his orchestrated 600-year celebration at the site, in 1989. But much less recognized is the fact that the importance that the Serbs attach to the Battle of that year, has only featured since the 1860s as justification for their claim at the time, to territory all the way to the Adriatic.

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In Di Lellio's earlier book, contributor Ivo Banac refutes the rights of the annexation of Kosovo by Serbia, in 1912. Despite negotiations over this right at the time, it was never ratified. It was the Serb conquest of Kosovo in 1912 which finally confirmed the subsequent and continuous inequalities of the peoples. Banac also addresses the allegation that Tito's Yugoslav policies favoured the Albanians of Kosovo, observing that the Albanians got the maximum of what that regime offered 'limited equality with other regime élites', but not the status of a republic.

The hero of the Battle of Kosovo has been widely heralded through epic song as Serbian Miloš Obilić who assassinated the invading Sultan Murat of the Ottoman Empire. However, this book provides, in eight versions of the Battle, Millosh Kopiliq as the Albanian hero. In both languages this hero is himself killed shortly after assassinating the Sultan. Both versions show defeat of the celebrated anti-Ottoman defenders.

What is now becoming recognized is that in fact the Battle (whether or not it is accurately recorded) saw collaboration of Christians from many countries: the Serbs were supported by Bulgarians, Hungarians, Walachians, Bosnians, Croats and Albanians. This counters claims that Albanians were always on the side of the Ottoman Empire against the Christian powers and that Kosovo is, as is often claimed, the 'cradle of the Serb nation'. Later conversions of Albanians to Orthodoxy, on the other hand, were often forced. Di Lellio also points to other interpretations, one proposed by Muhammet Piraku that the Battle was a conspiratorial invention of Murat's son Bayezit and Lazar's son Stefan, to accelerate succession; another interpretation, given by Ismail Kadare supports the idea of the Battle as an invention, but created as a symbol of brotherhood for all the Balkan peoples.

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Di Lellio addresses the allegations that Albanians in Kosovo are actually descendants of Albanianized Serbs, and that it was the Muslim conversion of most Kosovar Albanians which caused their estrangement from Slavs. Noel Malcolm has pointed out that these controversies have only arisen since the mid-19th century when a religious divide became evident; however, the Serb nationalist doctrine emphasized the role of the Orthodox Church (accentuated even more, with strong Church support during the 1980s), while the Albanian nationalist doctrine emphasized the Albanian language.

The book is supplied with an ample bibliography and will surely elicit extreme scrutiny and infinite discussion.

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