

**Richard C. Hall, *The Modern Balkans: A History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011.**

**Pp. 208. Reviewed by Antonia Young.**

There is never complete agreement concerning the exact boundaries of the region known as The Balkans, nor have the countries within that region remained constant; all are deeply affected by the dramatic geography and overlaid by ever changing, strong political and religious influences. Hall's portrayal of recent Balkan history intertwines intricately the influences of the numerous countries involved, on one another, bringing important new perspectives and nuances to the complicated overall picture.

Hall prefaces the History with a chapter on 'Geography', that covers geographical features of the Balkan Peninsula. He points out that the region, 70% mountainous, cannot support great agricultural wealth for a landholding class that could have brought stronger identities and political unity. However, he does not give credit to the fact that the Balkans states were also important exporters of agricultural goods. Aside from foodstuffs there were also leather, wool and textile goods, important both to the Ottoman Empire and to Austro-Hungary. A brief history of the religious influences of the region follows, which could have been extended.

The next chapter title "The Middle Ages to 1804" is a misnomer: it starts in 2000 BCE, discussing the Minoans, Mesopotamia, Greek and Roman cultures, Constantinople and the 1054 split of the Roman and Byzantine Empires before reaching the ending of pre-Ottoman empires.

Western historical analysis concerning the Ottoman Empire has only recently allowed it a favourable view. The label *Pax Ottomanica* refers to its heyday as a civilization in the 16th and 17th centuries—a period of few invasions and revolts, and

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widespread acceptance of the Muslim faith—which was often offered in exchange for tax relief not conceded to those who outwardly retained their Christian faith.

Hall's chapter, 'The Intrusion of Modernity' introduces the topic of his book: modern states since 1804. Increased agricultural production supported the development of a Balkan merchant class. A failure of the Ottoman Empire to adapt, despite the attempts through *Tanzimat* (Reorganization) from the early years of the 19th century, led to uprisings and revolts against Ottoman rule: one in Patras, and the Greek War of independence supported by a British-French-Russian fleet. A major turning point was the Treaty of San Stefano of March 1877 establishing a Greater Bulgaria, thus granting the Bulgarians their nationalist objectives, the first peoples in the Balkans to achieve this. However, only a year later the Congress of Berlin reallocated borders to the dissatisfaction of all the Balkan states, and leading to major emigrations of Islamic peoples to remaining Ottoman lands from both Serbia and Greece. Thereafter further nationalist advances had to obtain the sanction of the Great Powers, forcing the Balkan states to establish subordinate, fragile relationships with individual Great Powers, particularly Austria-Hungary and Russia. Albanian nationalism progressed through the use of their language as a unifier (adopting the latin script from 1908), rather than religion. A 19th century writer, Pashko Vasa wrote, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century dictator, Enver Hoxha quoted him: 'the religion of Albania is Albanianism'.

The efforts of the London conferences of the Great Powers, were both unable to prevent the disastrous Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, and their effects are still being felt a century later. The outcome was particularly damaging for Bulgaria which lost 66,000 soldiers, much of the territory it had recently gained and was to lose more land in treaties a few years later. It was not alone in experiencing the terrible suffering

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of the First World War. As Hall notes Bulgaria, thwarted three times in fifty years in its attempts to incorporate Macedonia as part of Bulgaria, earned the hostility of most of its neighbours. All Balkan states also suffered damaged infrastructure, mass refugee crises and integration difficulties that undermined political stability throughout the region. Competition from more industrialized markets reduced the value of Balkan-produced grains and led to vulnerability from which Nazi Germany took advantage.

Hall discusses the serious security threats to all the Balkan states, by the three external powers, Italy, Germany and Soviet Russia during the inter-war years. Important changes were also brought about during those years in the re-establishment of Albanian independence and the development of the new state of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later to become Yugoslavia. Hall argues that this federation evolved through an idea of Illyrianism 'that the Slavic peoples of the Balkan Peninsula had a single cultural identity' (p.87).

The various Peace Conferences following the end of the First World War saw the break-up of Austro-Hungary to the benefit particularly to Romania. Its enlargement, resulted in a range of minority populations (Bulgarians, Germans, Hungarians and Ukrainians).

Hall's claims that with Carol II of Romania's royal dictatorship, 'Romania became the last country in the Balkans to install an authoritarian regime' (p. 98). He makes no mention of the two later dictatorships: Romania's Nicolae Ceauşescu and Enver Hoxha of Albania.

From a Balkan perspective, Germany prior to the Second World War, appeared to be a lesser evil than Italy, for it already provided strong economic ties and a bond to fend off the attack feared from Soviet Russia. However, for Albanians, Italy

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offered unity, rectifying the Great Powers' error of drawing Albania's borders so that half the Albanian population lived just outside its borders. The Albanian *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) might have defeated the Communist partisans of Albania had Britain not supported the Communists in their attempt to defeat the Germans. Indeed this dilemma was also faced by other Balkan nations, and national aspirations led to collaboration with the Fascists, thus putting them in opposition to Britain and its allies who, as a result, became the supporters of Communist resistance.

Hall mentions the Jews in Albania, but does not give sufficient credit to the remarkable role Albania played. No Jews were transported out of the country to the gas chambers, as they were from every other Eastern European country. Furthermore the many Jews who fled into Albania were hidden and protected throughout the War by individual Albanians.<sup>1</sup> In 1991, all Albania's Jews accepted the invitation to migrate to Israel. In contrast, Bulgaria imposed anti-Semitic measures on their 50,000 Jews. Few of those living within the newly acquired regions survived the War. Romania with the largest Jewish population in the South Eastern Europe, also became the most severely anti-Semitic regime of the region.

Bulgaria annexed Macedonia in 1941 without having to fire a shot, they also obtained a portion of eastern Serbia and part of Greek Macedonia. Greece also suffered severely during the later part of the War, many from famine caused by German expropriation of food resources. Up to 250,000 died of starvation.

Through Soviet control (1945–53), Hall demonstrates how Russian Communism offered the opportunity of rapid industrial development and modernization. Bulgaria, one of the first countries to take advantage of this situation, was relatively well prepared, having already a viable Communist party in existence

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst many references to this are Harvey Sarner's *Rescue in Albania: one hundred percent of Jews in Albania rescued from Holocaust* (1997), and Apostol Kotani, *Albania and the Jews* (1995).

before the Second World War. Albania, on the other hand was ill-prepared; very underdeveloped, and with no previous Communist movement. Romania's position vis-à-vis Soviet Russia deteriorated: as Russia prised Bessarabia away and took control of Romania. Soviet Russia treated their victorious wartime ally, Yugoslavia rather too patronizingly, a situation that Yugoslavia tolerated for only three years.<sup>2</sup> Despite the very varied situations of the Eastern European states under Soviet Communist domination, Hall finds that the overall experience of the Balkan peoples, was very similar. They all lived under totalitarian regimes established with the help of foreign military forces; show trials were used to eliminate unwanted leaders from the old regimes. All of them also developed collectivized agriculture, and all lost individual liberty. On the other hand, under Communism, accessible education, subsidized housing, health care and pensions provided security at the cost of a severe lack of personal freedom.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, Yugoslavia's relationship with Soviet Russia eased considerably. However, Albania's response to de-Stalinsation was to form an alliance with the Chinese, declaring that 'We and the Chinese are one billion strong'. Romania also kept good relations with China, and cooled towards the Warsaw Pact. When NATO admitted West Germany in 1955, the Soviets created this as an alliance to include the all Eastern European countries.

In 1968, Yugoslavia recognized Bosnians for their secular nationality rather than as a religious community. Over 70 percent of the Yugoslav National Army officer corps were Serbian or Montenegrin. Yugoslavia's tourist industry developed during the 1970s. At the same time, the country was promoted as a neutral nation

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<sup>2</sup> An additional new and detailed source for this information is Geoffrey Swain's *Tito: a biography* in I.B.Tauris's 'Communist Lives' series, London, 2011.

while continuing to pursue a combination of federalism, and Workers' Self-Management.

By the time Tito died in 1980, Hall argues, 'all the Balkan Communist dictatorships were becoming politically and morally exhausted' (p. 154). Gorbachev was one of the few younger leaders, and his radical introduction of *perestroika* affected not only the Soviet Union, but also the whole of Communist Europe. Despite Romanians' suspicion of the Soviet Union, they welcomed Gorbachev when he visited them in 1989. Nicolae Ceaușescu had already lost favour in the West as his egomaniacal tendencies increased.

In the 1980s, without Soviet military and financial support the whole bloc crumbled. Yugoslavia's was the most disastrous collapse: in seeking independence, five of the six federal republics had specific relationships with their non-Yugoslav neighbours. These variously affected the direction they took. Bosnia, the only republic with no outside neighbor, only a few miles of Adriatic sea coast, and with the most equally divided population (by ethnic background: between Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim) suffered the most. As with Kosovo (previously an autonomous region within Serbia). many thousands were killed. In the break-up Macedonia faced intense Greek hostility on account of its name: it had to settle for the name 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)'.

Hall's brief account of the dramatic events of the early 1990s in Albania, leading to anarchy in 1997 might mislead the reader into believing that the Italian-led-international peacekeeping force provided a simple solution. It was the parliamentary election of June 1997, with 2,000 international observers headed by Austrian Chancellor Vranitsky that also helped to relieve the extremely volatile situation.

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The author might also have expanded his account of intense hostilities in Kosovo, not only in from 1997, but throughout earlier decades (especially after 1981). At all times both before and since the War, Serbia has had the benefit of a full diplomatic voice, which the Kosovars have never had. It has deprived them of opportunities to present their case, or even to take up scholarly opportunities to reach higher levels of education. The importance of the role that NATO played in ending the Kosovo War should have been emphasized, especially as it helped change the course of NATO's involvement in worldwide thereafter. Kosovo was also the first country to use the Euro, (prior to that they used the deutschmark, which Montenegro adopted in 1996). Ten years later Kosovo declared independence from what remained of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro); to which it had been attached since 1918. Hall saw the failure of the Serbian government to turn Ratko Mladić over to the International War Crimes Tribunal (resolved shortly after the book's publication) as a major obstacle to Serbia's integration into the EU.

Despite the extreme changes in all the Eastern European countries, Albania, Bulgaria and Romania share a situation where former Communists have transformed themselves into Socialists, have competed in elections, and participated in governments, apparently giving up their previous authoritarian views. A common factor is a rise in nationalism and resulting ethnic hatred. Corruption is found in all the former Communist countries as is the residue of environmental damage and obsolete industrial enterprises, blighting the cities.

Hall also notes the visits or attempted return of former royalty, 'King' Leka in Albania, Bulgaria's Tsar Simeon, King Constantine of Greece, King Michael of Romania and Crown Prince Alexander Karadjordjević of Serbia.

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The book's 'Conclusion' reads more like an Introduction. Hall's comments about the inhabitants of Albania and Bosnia finding Islam appealing, omit the fact that inducements were offered to entice them to convert; in any case by the beginning of the nineteenth century Western European rationality and secularism had intruded.

Of the six maps (not eight, as the publishers' press release claims, and not listed in the Contents) are nevertheless usefully placed throughout the book, showing the historical changes over time. The first (geographical map) shows the physical features: rivers and mountains. However, the first historical map shows the boundaries of the Ottoman Balkans, and an identical map 30 pages on is labelled 'The Balkan Peninsula, 1878'. Two more maps show the shake ups and new political formations following the First and Second World Wars. The final map shows Yugoslavia after 1991 (though Hall might more exactly have given the date 2008—the date that Kosovo claimed independence; Montenegro's independence dates from 2006—up to 2008 the borderline with Serbia could have been a dotted line, as with Vojvodina).

Hall's carefully selected bibliography emphasizes the most authoritative books covering the whole region. His emphasis is very strongly on Bulgarian history, while his inclusion of the history of the Albanians, who inhabited much of the region over a long period, is rather limited. The titles that might help to fill that gap are: Derek R. Hall, *Albania and the Albanians* (1994), Howard Clark, *Civilian Resistance in Kosovo*, Pluto, London, 2000. On Yugoslavia, John Allcock's *Explaining Yugoslavia*, Hurst, 2000, gives original sociological insights; and in support of Hall's biographies of several Balkan dictatorial rulers, Bernd J. Fischer's edited volume: *Balkan Strongmen: Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of Southeast Europe*, Hurst and Co., London, 2007 gives very full and fascinating detail.

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**Antonia Young is author of the annotated bibliography *Albania* (ABC-Clio, 1997), also the essay 'Kosova' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2010), as well as 'Bloodfeud Mediation' and 'Peace Parks' in the *Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace* (New York, 2010). She is Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford.**