

Central and Eastern European Review

Eugene Michail, *The British and the Balkans: Forming Images of Foreign Lands, 1900–1950*. London and New York: Continuum (2011), pp. 204. ISBN 978–0–826422682. Hbk £65.

Taking a similar theme to Božidar Jezernik's, *Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers*, and Andrew Hammond's *The Debated Lands: British and American Representations of the Balkan*, Eugene Michail's book gives different perspectives on how British travel writers have interpreted the Balkans. Focusing more on how this dimension has influenced British foreign policy, Michail's angle is on a more specific, much shorter, time frame. The book is divided into two parts, one focusing on the people, the second on images. He observes that Edward Said's work on Orientalism was pivotal in inspiring a new generation of human scientists to explore how a people or a culture historically represented and imagined other seemingly 'foreign' communities. Michail points out the demonization of the Ottomans up until the time of the Balkan Wars and how this influenced British foreign policy. He also claims to make further elaboration on the system of Balkanism, placing it in its historical context through a multiplicity of perceptions.

Media and scholarly studies have focused on the region's conflicts, whereas travelogues tend to record the more peaceful periods. In the second half of the 19th century as technological and sociocultural changes facilitated both travel and the reporting of it throughout Europe, increasing numbers of travellers of all kinds also reached and wrote about the Balkans. Thus a growing awareness of Balkan affairs was fuelled, stimulating further interest of the British public at a time when there were growing conflicts as the Ottomans lost control of various areas of the Balkans. The spiral of interest supported further media reporting as well as literary reflections (for example Bernard Shaw's 1894 play, *Arms and the Man*). Edith Durham's prolific writing began shortly after the Serbian regicide, a matter on which she had closer informants than most. By the time of Macedonia's rebellions against Ottoman rule, the British public were sufficiently informed to be able to debate the situation meaningfully, and newspapers responded with more material. Politicians and scholars were also highly involved. Michail notes that by the time of the outbreak of hostilities of October 1912, almost 150 foreign correspondents went out to Bulgaria to follow the major military developments. It was in the First World War that large scale filming of

Central and Eastern European Review

war became a possibility. It was then also that the British government, for the first time became a publicity agent of a Balkan state's nationalist cause: hundreds of British nurses and doctors set up field hospitals in Serbia, many of those later published about their experiences. Fiction also evolved; John Buchan's *Thirty Nine Steps* (1915), and *Greenmantle* (1916) as well as some crime fiction, popularized interest in the Balkans, as did reports of travel on the Orient Express.

Following the First World War, there was a decline in media attention to the Balkans, but this was replaced by increased reports of travel writers as mass travel by people from varying backgrounds, and from all over Europe developed. Most writers liked to show that they had reached another and exotic world, that their means of travel had been arduous. There was increasing enthusiasm for what they found (for example J. Swire's *King Zog's Albania*, 1937). Apparently during the 1930s, over 10,000 British citizens visited Yugoslavia annually. Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941) was amongst the last published travel writing on the region before the Second World War, which curtailed such travel for pleasure. Thus hers, as a finale of that period, gradually became very well known. The War brought a new body of writing, first reports and later memoirs of war experiences in the Balkans.

As individuals became experts on their countries of choice, the Balkans emerged in public and political debates, reinforcing the authority of the experts who in turn lobbied their networks and academia of various fields: archaeology, history, politics and anthropology. This enhanced interest further, especially amongst those of a privileged social milieu. A.J.P. Taylor, writing in 1957, noted that by reading travelogues of this era one could be better informed than by following official channels. News media in the UK kept up with the war news from the Balkans fully, but lost interest in the region between times of violence: at these times expert opinion had to be solicited. In the interim periods, experts were active in setting up organizations concerning their countries of interest. Edith Durham was a founder member of the Albanian Committee, which still exists as the Anglo-Albanian Association. At the beginning of the 20th Century, the value of these experts was recognized by the British government, Edith Durham wrote on Albanian-Turkish relations in 1908. The writing of official or scholarly reports lacked the more personal touches that travel writing afforded. In 1916 W. H. Smith ran the first periodical on foreign affairs, *New Europe*, claiming to contain the work of experts.

Central and Eastern European Review

In terms of the people of the Balkans, Michail notes that the first major forced population management were of 1.3 million Orthodox Greeks from Asia Minor and almost 400,000 Muslims from Greece to Turkey in the early 1920s (p. 57).

The positive image of the Balkans up to World War I, gave way to a negative 'frozen image' which was established by the end of 1910's. The word Balkanization was first coined in 1918. Atrocities, such as the Bulgarian slaughter of Muslims in the early 20th century, were seen as acceptable and justified by the outside world. Balkan nationalism was seen as positive. Extensive reporting of artillery bombardment (as of the Bulgarians at Adrianople), was reported as military feats, ignoring the suffering of besieged civilians. (p.83). But by the end of the World War I, the Balkans no longer seemed novel. It was a time that young nations were struggling to emerge: it was the New Eastern Europe (p. 90), with the triumph of new nation states. Also, by the end of Greek-Turkish war 1919–22, British interests waned. The 1920s–30's was a period of high profile assassinations throughout the Balkans, which was reflected in fiction of the time: and it coincided with a time when traditional liberal defenders of the region had passed on (p. 93) or become frustrated. This was when the Balkans was seen once again as a real trouble-spot, intensifying the negative image that Rebecca West promoted. Her support for Serbia (p. 93) was reflected in her writing. Later the Cold War removed violence and danger from descriptions of the Balkans.

Genres of ephemeral news influenced perceptions of readers, for example in 1929 the Orient Express was caught in a snowstorm, immobilized for six days in the Bulgarian mountains close to Turkish border. Agatha Christie based her *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) on this, thus prolonging the impact of that six day event. There was a focus on royal egos and national images 'beyond the Labour leaning press that showed some scattered interest in workers' conditions after the First World War, the issue for the media was never the democratization of the contemporary Balkan image,' but rather covered by travelogues and the studies of everyday life in the Balkan villages, attracting much more attention than the urban areas. The boom of photojournalist tabloids and weeklies on royal or national personalities or 'How many people in Britain were familiar with the most intimate details of the scandals of the Romanian royal family, without knowing anything else about Romania's current

Central and Eastern European Review

affairs, politics, culture and geography?’ (p. 195). There was interest in the height of King Zog’s forehead (reminding us of Carleton Coon’s extensive studies involving measuring dimensions of Albanian highlanders’ heads, recorded in his *Mountain of Giants: A Racial and Cultural Study of the North Albanian Mountain Ghegs*,¹ whose work was emulated by the current Albanian anthropologist, Aleksandër Dhima in his doctoral thesis book, *Gjurmime Antropologjike për Shqiptarët [Anthropological Traces for Albanians]*,² each presenting the reader with scores of unsmiling photographic portraits).

On the refusal, during World War I, by the two royal celebrities, King Constantine of Greece and King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, to ally their countries to the Entente, both fell from grace as heroes and ‘became two of the most recognizable villains of the war, overshadowed only by the Kaiser and the Sultan’ (p. 108). The next fad of interest was in royals acting unroyally. In contrast to Michail’s point above, about readers’ preference for descriptions of rural life, he cites Bernard Newman’s derision, in his *Balkan Background*³ of John Gunther’s international bestseller, *Inside Europe*⁴ for the fact that most of the chapter on Romania was devoted to King Carol’s love affairs and his mother’s personal story. ‘The blame should be placed on us rather than on the author. If his book had featured peasants instead of personalities, hundreds instead of millions would have read it’, (p. 109). Refreshingly, ‘Tito humanized the image of Balkan celebrity, and brought with it glimpses of the everyday life of the Balkan people’ (p. 113).

From 1917 onwards, the Balkans was the only European region where Orthodoxy was still freely practiced, attracting some Britons with special spiritual interest to visit and report on the situation. Michail selects Dudley Heathcote’s *My Wanderings in the Balkans* (1925), for his typical observation concerning the variety of ethnic mix in the region. Michail notes that use of the term ‘imperial borderland’ ceased at end of 19th century. The next stage in writing on the region saw newly independent Balkan nation states, facing the challenges of modernization. Italians and Austro-Hungarians were seen as modernizers. Baedeker guides became very

¹ Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. XXIII, no. 3, Cambridge, Mass, 1936.

² Albanian Academy of Sciences, Tirana, 1985.

³ Robert Hale, London, 1944, p. 231.

⁴ Harper, New York, pp. 438-46.

Central and Eastern European Review

popular at the turn of the century, but after WWI, British experts tended to feel that the Austrians had distorted Balkan history and portrayal of customs. Modernity was measured in such attributes as efficiency, industriousness or progressiveness by many travel writers. Albanians were seen at far end of the spectrum and were even described in school textbooks as having ‘barely reached the stage of settlement’ or in Edith Durham’s words, they lived in ‘the land of the living past’. While many travellers revelled in becoming a part of this, experts expressed the necessity for improvement and change. Rebecca West especially sought and praised signs of pre-modern life, as do tourists still, to any rural destination looking for the ‘genuine’ local flavour. The folklore movement, studying peasant culture thrived, observing Balkan regions, resulting in books and articles on songs and folk-tales. Margaret Hasluck was a more serious observer than Durham of Albanian folklore and customs.

The discussion of the vagueness and ambivalence concerning changing views of which countries/areas are included/excluded as Balkan or Eastern Europe, with the flexibility of borders, and the means for Britons to reach them, is left unusually until the last chapter before Michail’s conclusion. Most writers set this map at the start of their discussion. He comments on a tendency of travel writers first to focus on the differences they see in the lands travelled, but on return home their focus shifts to finding the similarities at home to what they have seen/experienced, concluding that it adds up to a rich elasticity representing the Balkans. The lack of the provision of any map would be seen by many as a disadvantage; a simple map of the Ottoman boundaries would be very helpful.

There is an extensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. The book contains a great deal of material and analysis, concisely presented, which anyone with a serious interest in the region will find extremely useful.

Antonia Young