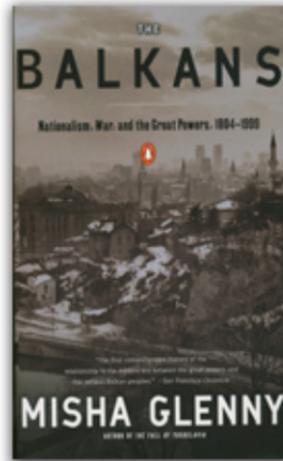


# Book Review

*By James Pettifer*

## *The Balkans*

*Misha Glenny*



TLS

## POLITICS

# Serbocentric views

JAMES PETTIFER

Misha Glenny

THE BALKANS 1804-1999 Nationalism, war and the great powers 276pp Crania Books. £25. 1163070904

In his earlier work, *The Death of Yugoslavia* (1992), Misha Glenny expertly chronicled the end of the second Yugoslavia. The British commander of UNPROFOR, General Sir Michael Rose, referred to Glenny (a BBC correspondent) as his main guide to the history of the region in his recently published memoirs

In *The Balkans 1804-1999*, Glenny seeks to find the historical causes of the conflict, set out in a single-volume account of Balkan history over the past 200 years. He has an explicit thesis, based in the old "non-aligned" Titoist tradition, that the troubles of the Balkans are inextricably linked to great-power meddling in the region, today as in the time of Venizelos or Bismarck. It is an appealing thesis, but given the demise of Titoism, the result is a book that is in some ways curiously dated. This is a pity, as Glenny is a good journalist and he has judiciously selected the topics that illustrate his argument, of which the Greek Civil War is the most plausible recent example

But as Barbara Jelavic showed in her multi-volume series on Balkan history, to cover even the main events in a region famous for its over-production of history requires much space, and in a single volume, even if a very large one, there are bound to be difficulties. There are numerous judgments that will enrage intellectuals of the different nationalities, and may deprive the book of serious consideration in their universities. It is difficult to know who is likely to be most offended, the Greeks or the Albanians, although Croats and Turks also have some very bad moments in the book. For Glenny, Serbia is the centre of the Balkan universe, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Greece and Romania have satellite status, and Slovenia and Albania are small, unimportant planets on the edge of the galaxy

A major problem in Glenny's thesis is its secularism. Islam is neglected, and the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church is greatly minimized. The Vatican is not discussed as a political power in the region, which is a considerable omission. Glenny gives an outstanding account of the Balkan Holocaust, and is good on the Jewish world of Thessaloniki, but the overall inconsist-

ency about religion leads to difficulties with the main argument, for as Hugh Poulton and others have shown conclusively, it is the faultlines of religion that usually determine Balkan identity in the end. Titoism did nothing to change this, however unpalatable that may be to modernizing secular liberals in Washington, or Brussels.

This book is essentially Serbocentric. Glenny does not chronicle the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans so much as the rise of Serbia, and then Yugoslavia, as the favoured protege of Britain, France and the United States. Other nations exist largely in relation to Serbia. Their struggle against the Porte in the early nineteenth century is thus the foundation stone of the narrative. This leads to odd distortions in interpretations of the various liberation struggles. The Greek War of Independence is played down. The struggles of the eighteenth-century Greeks against the Ottomans are absent, the London Greek Committee is subjected to a hatchet job, as is philhellenism; the fact that Greece, unlike Serbia, had a middle-class intelligentsia with wealth and good international connections is ignored.

This leads to other highly partisan conclusions: Glenny writes of the Congress of Berlin, "the Congress reserved its shabbiest treatment for the Serbs". Perhaps the Serbs did not get what they wanted, but then neither did most other Balkan peoples, with the exception of

Bulgaria. Nevertheless, in Bismarck's eyes, at least, Serbia had full recognition as a Balkan player. By contrast, the fateful decision was taken there that the Albanians did not constitute a proper nationality, they were merely inhabitants of a geographical area. This decision founded the Albanian national question that has haunted the region ever since.

Glenny's account of early twentieth-century history also contains what many will see as special pleading on behalf of Serbia, the bloody Serb takeover in 1912 of what is now the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in particular. Although Glenny acknowledges that the sieges of Kumanovo and Skopje "unleashed the full force of nationalist hatred against defenceless villages", which involved "massacres" of Muslim Turks and Albanians, it was nevertheless "an astute campaign which greatly impressed foreign observers". The prominence of the terrorist Black Hand organization in Serbian politics is also underplayed, whereas similar military offshoots in other countries' national movements against oppressors - from IMRO to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)-are harshly judged.

The best and the worst parts of the book are those covering the past ten years. As can be expected from the author of *The Death of Yugoslavia*, the machinations in the dying federation are well explored, but Slobodan Milosevic's regime comes off lightly. The centrality of Kosovo to the rise of Milosevic's power is not emphasized enough, and Glenny contends that "Milosevic's real aim was not to end Kosovo's autonomy". No evidence is produced to support this. It will seem an extraordinary viewpoint to the tens of thousands of Kosovars who went into prison or exile in the late 1980s and early 90s to escape Yugoslav state terror.

Serious difficulties also arise with the most recent war. Much of the language used to describe the KLA resembles Milosevic's propaganda

ministry's "White Book", published in 1998, where the movement is seen as purely terroristic, and its community-defence element ignored. Although the failure at Dayton to deal with Kosovo is well set out, there is nothing about the political origins of the KLA in the Kosovo People's Movement and other underground organizations

Neither of the two seminal English-language histories of Kosovo, published last year by Noel Malcolm and Miranda Vickers, appears in the bibliography, nor do important books on Serbia, by Tim Judah (1997) or Croatia by Marcus Tanner (1997) or Branka Magas's 1993 work on Yugoslavia in the late 1980s. There are serious errors in the account of recent Albanian history: we are told, for instance, that "in 1947, the Albanian leaders, Koci Xoxe and Enver Hoxha, agreed that their country would be absorbed as a seventh republic into Yugoslavia". In fact, the exact opposite was the case, with Hoxha only winning control of the party for his nationalist policies after Xoxe's arrest for collaboration with the Yugoslavs, the Tito-Stalin split and Xoxe's subsequent execution

In his account of late 1998 and early 1999, Glenny makes no direct reference at all to the appalling sufferings of the Kosovar Albanians caused by Serb paramilitary terror and, either intentionally or not, lends credence to the claims of critics of the NATO war that the bombing itself caused the refugee movements. There is also an attack on NATO's alleged lack of responsibility towards the Former Yugoslav Macedonia, with a suitably rosy-tinted picture painted of this small, nomenclatura-dominated country. Again, it is tempting to feel that the exact opposite of Misha Glenny's view is likely to be true, in that, with NATO installed there, FYROM at last has an effective guarantor of its borders.

It is instructive, perhaps, to think about who the ideal reader of this book might be. In the case of Misha Glenny's earlier hooks, it could have been Sir Michael Rose, but with this book it would be more likely to be someone in the Hotel Moscow cafe in Belgrade.