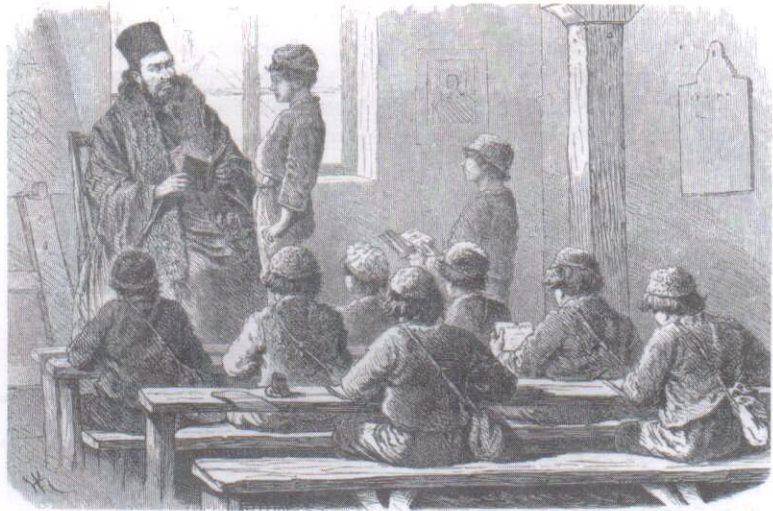


**EUROPE**  
and the  
**BALKANS**  
INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

# DISRUPTING AND RESHAPING EARLY STAGES OF NATION-BUILDING IN THE BALKANS

Edited by Marco Dogo and Guido Franzinetti



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Guido M. R. Franzinetti\*

*INTRODUCTION*

NATION-BUILDING AND STATE-BUILDING IN THE BALKANS

J. H. Elliott once remarked that until Ottoman history was fully integrated into European history our understanding of modern Europe was bound to be lopsided<sup>1</sup>. It still continues to be so, despite the significant expansion of Ottoman studies in the last three decades, reflecting the much greater accessibility of Ottoman archives to scholars<sup>2</sup>. This state of affairs also applies to Balkan history, which still continues to be either left on the sidelines, or otherwise treated according to traditional paradigms<sup>3</sup>.

The past three decades have witnessed significant changes in the historiography of nation-building in the Balkans, which is the topic of this collection of papers<sup>4</sup>. These changes have involved both a revision of Nationalist and Romantic paradigms of the history of the different Balkan states, and new approaches to the history of the Balkans based on social sciences (economic history, social history and demographic history). Innovations have reflected both the use of new sources and a clear distancing from the "Risorgimento"-style reading of Balkan history. The new interpretations of nationalism as a historical phenom-

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<sup>1</sup> J. H. Elliott, *Europe Divided 1554-1598*, London-Glasgow, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> For a general introduction to Ottoman studies, see Suraiya Faruqi, *Approaching Ottoman History. An Introduction to the Sources*, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> For a traditional approach to Balkan history see, e.g., Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, second edition, London, 1994 (original edition Frankfurt a.M., 1984). For a comprehensive and critical discussion of Western historiography of the Balkans, see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York-Oxford, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> The papers were presented at a workshop held in Trieste on 27-28 October 2000.

enon and nation-building have profound implications for Balkan historiography.

Marco Dogo's paper (*Before and outside the nation*) is directed at challenging the legacy of the Risorgimento paradigm, with its vision of a basically successful process of nation-building, of national integration and collective identification. Dogo is more interested in assessing the historical position of those who were left out of the nation-building process, rather than of those who promoted it. The national revolutions of the Balkans are seen as the effect of the political disorder of the late Ottoman period, rather than the cause. The inconsistencies (or, to use a word which has now gone out of fashion, the contradictions) of the Ottoman reform process were the cause of the Ottoman decline and collapse. At the end of the day, it was very much a case of every man for himself.

The populations of the newly established states were by no means easy to integrate. There were still significant numbers of Muslims (who were in fact "foreigners", i.e. Ottoman subjects, rather than "minorities" in the current sense of the word). There were populations that were functionally or socially unassimilated (nomads, bandits, etc.). There were populations whose loyalty to local notables remained paramount. And then there were the forces of religious conservatism (which could be Orthodox, as well as Muslim). Furthermore, the high levels of illiteracy severely restricted the scope of any nation-building effort by the state. Political integration does not appear to have been any more effective in transforming the Balkan peasant into a true believer of the new nationalist creed.

Mirjana Marinković's paper (*The shaping of the modern Serbian nation and of its state under Ottoman rule*) represents a significant contribution from a young Ottomanist. The interest of her paper lies in the evidence it presents for an accurate dating of the shift in Ottoman documents from the use of the term *reaya* to the term *millet* with reference to the Serbs. This contribution is part of a wider discussion on the historical use of the term *millet*<sup>5</sup>.

Kostas Kostis' paper (*The formation of the state in Greece, 1830-1914*) addresses directly the issue of state-building as such. Kostis suggests a definition of the state as a process, rather than as an institution. In terms of the historical tasks it set itself, and given the weakness of its structures, the new Greek state was relatively successful. It created "a state apparatus which, with very limited means, succeeded in absorbing local political elites and peasant populations [...] and in promoting itself as the only factor of legitimacy of political life. That is, it succeeded in the institutionalisation of state power".

Alexei Kalionski (*Ethnicity and migrations. The Bulgarian case, 1830-*

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to the debate on the term, see M. Ursinus, «Millet», in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, VII, Leiden, 1993.

1915) presents a detailed picture of migratory processes in the Bulgarian lands, based on a wide range of sources. He devotes particular attention to the more socially marginal groups and microgroups. This data concerning the ethnic mosaic of the Bulgarian lands could be usefully integrated in a more comprehensive picture of the ethnic mosaic of the entire Balkan region.

Michael Palairet (*Rural Serbia reshaped and retarded, 1739-1914*) presents what is in some respects a case study as part of his general approach to the economic history of the Balkans. Palairet has already illustrated his approach in a series of contributions, which culminated in *The Balkan Economies c. 1800-1914. Evolution without development*<sup>6</sup>. His view may be defined as an extremely pessimistic assessment of the consequences of the creation of Balkan nation-states from the point of view of the economic development of the region. It is very tempting for historians (especially for those who do not have a background in economics, i.e. most of them) to dismiss the issues Palairet raises as irrelevant or besides the point, since what matters in nation-building is the politics, not the economics. It is indeed tempting, but it is a temptation that should not be accepted too easily. Undoubtedly, the choices made by nineteenth-century political actors must be judged in terms of their own epoch. Nevertheless, economic rationality does affect human behaviour and human choices, as Eastern Europeans are all too painfully aware these days. Economic rationality may affect behaviour and choices in a variety of ways, but it does remain an extremely powerful constraint. As Palairet makes clear, the ratio of men to land, for example, was an extremely powerful force in conditioning the choices Serb leaders made throughout the nineteenth century. The debate on the interconnection between economic constraints and political choices in the Balkans has barely started, and it needs to be pursued with more energy.

Diana Mishkova's paper (*The nation as zadruga: Remapping nation-building in nineteenth-century Southeast Europe*) is in many respects antithetical to Dogo's paper. Her balance sheet of the effectiveness of Balkan national-building is much more favourable than Dogo's (and Palairet's). This is not because Mishkova proposes a return to the old-fashioned triumphalism of the Romantic Nationalist tradition. Far from it. Mishkova is proposing what is essentially a "neo-realist" approach to Balkan nationalism, i.e. an evaluation of its effectiveness in terms of a re-reading of the historical rationality of state-building at the time.

In tackling this kind of historiographical discussion, participants sometimes fall into the trap of the discussions of the type illustrated by the question: "Is the glass half-empty or is it half-full?". In short, is Balkan nationalism half-successful or half a failure? Put in these terms, the discussion is inevitably sterile. What

<sup>6</sup> Cambridge, 1997.

is more relevant is an understanding of the reasons why in history and in the social sciences so many scholars have become wary of *any* comparison which might remotely appear to have a normative judgement attached to it. This is understandable (given the ups and downs of the history of twentieth-century Europe) but, methodologically speaking, disastrous. A writer from a less intellectually inhibited epoch once wrote:

About thirty years ago there was much talk that geologists ought only to observe and not theorise; and I well remember some one saying that at this rate a man might as well go into a gravel-pit and count the pebbles and describe the colours. How odd it is that anyone should not see that all observation must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service<sup>7</sup>.

In short, the fear of sliding into dogmatism as soon as one makes the slightest comparison (or uses a paradigm to make historical judgements) should be discarded. If historians want to make comparisons between Balkan states and other states or regions of Europe, they should do so openly.

Mishkova does not address directly the issue of historical comparability, but she does provide elements for an understanding of Balkan state-building. She sees nationalism not as an effect of modernity, but rather as an autonomous cause of it: "in economically backward conditions [...] it was the nation-state that was typically taken to be the one that had to create the preconditions of the transformation, not vice versa". The problem of the new Balkan states was intimately connected with the disappearance or the defeat of traditional local notables and the corresponding enfranchisement of the peasant masses. The result was that in the early stages of state-building "the structure of power and its destination obeyed the rationality of traditional government". (This was true even in Romania, which had a social structure which was quite different from the rest of the region.) It was only with the advent of the Liberals that "popular assemblies assumed the functions of really sovereign and representative bodies". The Liberals raised "the archaic view of these institutions to the modern principle of popular sovereignty, and ["extracted"] the norms of the modern state from the institutional traditions of the old self-government system and the «ancient custom»".

This "synthesis between tradition and modernity" was at the same time an achievement in terms of state-building, but also a legacy that had profound consequences. Romania followed a quite different path, and did not achieve what

<sup>7</sup> Charles Darwin to Henry Fawcett, 18 September 1861, in C. Darwin, *Correspondence*, Vol. 9, Cambridge, 1994 (I would like to thank professor Andrea Graziosi for giving me the precise reference for this quotation).

Mishkova calls the “congruity between the Liberal cause and civic nationalism that Liberals south of the Danube succeeded to achieve”. The effect of this gap was made dramatically evident by the great Romanian peasant revolt of 1907.

Mishkova’s overall interpretation has been elaborated further in her recent book<sup>8</sup>. The single most interesting aspect of this interpretation is the central role that it attributes to parliamentary institutions and the electoral process. Undoubtedly, elections were often conducted in conditions that rarely allowed a genuine expression of voters’ preferences. But what matters, in a realistic historical perspective, is the effect that these elections had in providing a new legitimisation for the newly created nation-states. (Bismarck was well aware of the importance of this factor, which is why he had introduced universal suffrage for the elections to the *Reichstag*.)

Seçil Deren (*From pan-Islamism to Turkish nationalism: modernisation and German influence in the late Ottoman period*) provides a general overview of the evolution of Turkish nationalism in the context of growing German influence. Indeed, she sees Turkish nationalism “as an original and systematic ideological formulation [which] was moulded and propagated by German politicians, academicians and policy-makers, rather than the Turks themselves”. This sort of mechanism is not at all unusual in the history of nationalism in Eastern Europe; what is generally lacking is a historical awareness and acceptance of it. As Deren points out, the Turkish intelligentsia was instead “engaged with finding a remedy for the constant decline of power in the Empire and the following loss of territory. The central concern was thus what to propose or choose to do as a remedy”. This again fits in quite neatly with a recurring pattern in the historical experience of European nationalism as a whole.

Nesim Şeker (*General elections of 1919 elections in Turkey*) examines the background and the significance of the first Turkish elections in 1919. These elections were one of the first steps in marking a clear break with the Ottoman polity, not least in the transfer from Istanbul to Ankara: “it was not an Ottoman Parliament in that it represented only Turkish/Muslim people as a whole. The deputies were quite conscious of this and therefore [...] they worked for laying the foundations of a new state on a nationalist basis”. Once again, parliamentary institutions are seen to play a crucial role in the process of legitimisation. Turkish history clearly benefits from being analysed in an East European context.

<sup>8</sup> *Prisposobjavane na svobodata. Modernost – legitimnost v Sārbija i Rumānija prez XIX vek*, Sofia, 2001 (Cyrillic).