

How We Made the Balkans

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By Dusko Doder

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When the Pulitzer prizes were announced in April, surprisingly none of the hundreds of journalists covering the war in the Balkans last year were among the winners. This is quite a statement, given the fact that the air war against Serbia consumed more newsprint than any other event in 1999. A photojournalist team of three was honored for Kosovo coverage, but I honestly doubt that one manipulable digital picture may be worth thousands of words when it comes to complicated ethnic conflicts.

The Kosovo war may have produced a richer crop of misinformation and outright lies than anything since Vietnam, but what probably guided the Pulitzer jury was a general sense of unease about the moral ambiguity of the whole business. By bombing Serbian cities, the United States initially seemed to be committing evil to achieve a higher good. In Tony Blair's Orwellian image, this was "bombardment with compassion" and a selfless moral act driven by a commitment to humanitarian values. The problem arose after the war's end, when the newly liberated Albanian Kosovars began murdering the defeated Serbs under the noses of US and other NATO peacekeepers. Was this

the higher good? If the greatest military machine in history is unable to impose law and order in a small province, what does the future hold for the larger international protectorate of Bosnia?

Other questions followed. Can one have a purely humanitarian foreign policy? Does the United States have the power to do good around the world, and more specifically, who in Washington or London can say with certitude what good is? Why Kosovo and not Rwanda?

None of these questions were properly addressed during a wartime public relations campaign that spewed commingled facts, fact-based fiction and semi-fiction over the twenty-four-hour infotainment channels. By the time the Clinton Administration was celebrating a moral victory, the country was sick and tired of the Balkans. A tabloid headline, "Serbs Them Right," summed up the popular attitude to the bombardment of Serbia. So it was easy for the Administration to move on, but not before disclaiming any responsibility for the consequences of its half-baked, ill-conceived intervention in the "places of which no one ever heard before this war," to use Bismarck's description of the Balkans more than a century ago. After all, the Balkans were Europe's powder keg, or a toxin threatening the health of Europe. Aren't Balkan tribes prone to savagery and irrational hatreds so powerful and longstanding that they have lodged themselves in the genetic makeup of the region's inhabitants, who are, consequently, the sole source of their own misfortunes? Even the pseudoliberals, with their subtler methods of distortion, have found explanations in the rather dubious notion that the Albanian revenge killings are less reprehensible than Serbia's murderous oppression that preceded them; here, we were told, there is no moral equivalence.

Finally and mercifully, we can always blame Slobodan Milosevic, indicted by the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague and one of the originators of the Yugoslav wars.

Misha Glenny, a British journalist who covered the disintegration of Yugoslavia for the BBC, is regarded as one of the most astute observers of the Balkan scene. His dispatches during the Balkan wars were crisp and penetrating, a notch above the average level of reporting from the region. Apart from his intellectual gifts, he possessed clear advantages over most other foreign correspondents: He spoke the local languages and had access to Yugoslav society (he was married to a Serb at the time). His 1993 book, *The Fall of Yugoslavia*, received critical acclaim, and his analytical articles appeared on the editorial pages of major US and British newspapers.

Glenny's *The Balkans*, however, is a book different in kind from nearly all that have appeared on either side of the Atlantic, including his first book. As soon as one opens it one is aware that here is a grown-up man who possesses a kind of intellectual decency that is rarer than cleverness. He is not a historian, nor does he pretend to be one. But he has thought deeply about the subject matter, and he decided to write this book "prompted by the realization that I was, along with many other observers of the wars in Yugoslavia during the 1990s, obliged to make judgments about Yugoslav and Balkan history when I had only the vaguest acquaintance with the subject."

The result is an imaginative and at times provocative chronicle of nationalism, wars and the role of great powers in modern Balkan history from 1804 to 1999. *The Balkans* focuses on key processes and underlying causes—in Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, Turkey, Montenegro—and puts together a synthetic study of events that have shaped the region and our perception of it. The canvas is vast, populated by colorful leaders ranging from the "Red Sultan," Abdulhamid II, and Eleutherios Venizelos to King Zog and Marshal Tito. It is a relatively easy and interesting read. Minor factual errors and occasional lack of deeper understanding of various Balkan peoples—the nature of Albanian society and the role of *besa* (word of honor) in their moral system—do not impinge on the logic and cogency of his arguments. But such few errors, including the fact

that Glenny relied only on secondary sources, will be eagerly seized on by critics as evidence of the book's grave flaws. And critics are bound to be numerous, because Glenny's approach is new and his interpretations are original.

Unlike vast quantities of books on the Balkans, Glenny's audacious theme is that a good deal of the mess there has been generated by interventions of the great powers—or the “international community,” as we say nowadays. The Balkans, he writes, were “not the powderkeg, as is so often believed; the metaphor is inaccurate. They were merely the powder trail that the great powers themselves had laid.”

Before the 1990s, there had been three major great-power interventions in the Balkans in the past two centuries. The first was at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, where the cutting and pasting of territories by imperial cartographers—whose only immutable principle was the advancement of great-power interests—created lasting wounds. The second began with Austria-Hungary's assault on Serbia in the summer of 1914 and ended with the great population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923. The third began with unprovoked attacks by Italy and Germany on the Balkans in World War II and ended with the installment of Communist governments in all countries of the region except Greece. These three interventions were so destructive, Glenny argues, that they guaranteed the Balkans' relative economic backwardness.

The violence that these interventions encouraged—often inflicted by one Balkan people on another—insured the continuation of profound civil and nationalist strife. In the West, however, these events are rarely regarded as the result of external intervention. On the contrary, the Balkan countries are seen as culprits who force the reluctant outside powers into their unfathomable conflicts. This imagined Balkans—a world where people are motivated not by rational consideration but by a mysterious congenital bloodthirstiness—is always invoked when the great

powers seek to deny their responsibility for the economic and political difficulties that the region has suffered as a consequence of external interference.

It is against this background that Glenny invites us to judge the NATO attack on Serbia and its aftermath. Should the West fail to address the effects of the air war and the preceding decades of miscalculation and indifference, then there is little to distinguish NATO's intervention from those of its great-power predecessors. Who can claim a moral or political victory if the sole achievement is the expulsion of Milosevic's Serbia from Kosovo?

Glenny's 200-year history of the Balkans begins with the 1804 Serbian uprising against the Ottoman Turks and centers on the Serbs, who, alone among the Balkan nations, fought their own way to statehood. The Greeks rebelled in 1821 and eventually succeeded, with military help from Britain, France and Russia. Foreign powers played a crucial role in the later emergence of Romania and Bulgaria.

The start of the Balkan tragedy lies in the fact that the newly independent countries were peasant societies poorly equipped to assimilate the ideas of the Enlightenment and were located at the intersection of competing empires. To compensate for their political and economic feebleness, national elites sought support for their aspirations from the great powers. In return, the great powers expected services from their clients.

The Balkan armies were funded by Western loans, Western firms supplied them with weapons and other technology, and their officers were schooled and organized by Frenchmen, Germans, Russians and Britons. The compulsion of the new states to grab territory, with scant regard for the facts of demography or history, reflected the practice of their great-power neighbors, whose arbitrary decisions at the Congress of Berlin insured that there was plenty of territory to dispute.

Balkan militarism and nationalism are closely related to the practices and morality of the great powers. Bismarck, the host of the Berlin Congress, believed in the rule of naked force: If a

country could not field and sustain a large army, its opinion was of no value. The congress was convened by the great powers— Britain, Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary and France—to solve the Balkan crisis, known at the time as the Great Eastern crisis, which arose from the Ottoman Empire’s weakening hold over its territories in southeastern Europe. The real mission of the Berlin Congress was to check Russia’s expansion to the Aegean.

The crisis, caused by Serb uprisings in Bosnia and Herzegovina against the Ottomans that began in the 1840s, escalated over the years, with Serbia and Montenegro supporting the insurgents. Russia first came down on the side of the Serbs, but this ended in military failure. A rebellion in Bulgaria against the Ottomans saw the Russian Army marching into the Balkans, this time successfully defeating the Turks. In December of 1877 Russian troops halted on the Aegean Sea about twenty miles west of Istanbul, setting up a liberated Bulgaria as a large client state, which was formally accepted by Turkey in the Treaty of San Stefano.

Russia was now in a position to dominate the Balkans and have access to the Black Sea, which was unacceptable to both Britain and Austria-Hungary. Two months later, in February 1878, British Navy vessels reached the Dardanelles, and European war seemed a real possibility. Bismarck offered Germany’s services of mediation to avert it. The great powers had secretly taken the most important decisions in advance: Russia, forced to accept a diplomatic setback, was given a part of Romania (southern Bessarabia) to compensate for its loss of access to the Aegean. The Habsburgs were given Bosnia and Herzegovina. Britain got Cyprus. France occupied Tunisia.

More significant over the long term, the great powers simply ignored all interests and demands of the Balkan states themselves and, as Glenny puts it, “exacerbated the problems wherever conceivable by willfully ignoring the local demographic balance.”Serbia was singled out for the shabbiest treatment: Bismarck explicitly excluded the Serbian foreign minister from access to the congress, while the Persians, scarcely central players

in the crisis, were allowed to address the gathering. Serbia and its sister state, Montenegro, were forced to accept humiliating trade and foreign policy restrictions.

The intersection of Russian and Austro-Hungarian interests was such that even relatively obscure issues between Balkan states could escalate into a much larger conflict. This became clear when Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908; the Russians now began encouraging Balkan states to enter into alliances that would check further Austrian encroachments, particularly its unhealthy interest in Macedonia and the Albanian coast. In addition, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria mounted a joint effort aimed at grabbing territory from Turkey in Albania, Macedonia, Thrace, Crete and the Aegean Islands. Two Balkans wars—in 1912 and 1913—virtually pushed Turkey out of Europe.

One of the most interesting parts of Glenny's book is its earlier chapters, in which he analyzes the impact of the Balkan crisis on Western politics. The Turkish massacres in Bosnia and Bulgaria in the 1870s were the moment when public opinion assumed "a key role in the formulation" of British policy. This, in turn, had a greater impact on British politics than on the fate of suffering Balkan Christians. (Gladstone defeated Disraeli for the prime ministership in 1880 after blaming him for being too soft on the Turks in the Balkans.)

Each great power, Glenny argues, "was swayed in one way or another by public reaction to newspaper reports." Politicians, who possessed accurate information, were in a position to shape public relations. This new dimension to public affairs represents the first stage of the modern art of spin. In Russia, the intellectuals (Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky among them) demanded a humanitarian intervention to alleviate the plight of their Slav cousins. The Russian establishment, however, was more concerned about future territorial allocations of the Ottoman lands. Count Ignatiev, one of the Czar's top diplomats, wrote that Russia must fight Austria-Hungary for primacy in the Balkans. "To be satisfied with merely humanitarian success," he said, "would be foolish and reprehensible."

The surest way of stirring up public opinion was through the European newspapers. There is no doubt that Christians suffered in the Ottoman Empire and that the Turks were responsible for terrible crimes. The Serbs in Bosnia, on the other hand, were waging a sustained guerrilla campaign. On hearing that Serbs and Bulgarian insurgents were massacring Muslim civilians, the Turks moved quickly to exact revenge. In one particularly gruesome incident in Bulgaria, the press trumpeted the charge of horrible Turkish atrocities, claiming that untold thousands—some claimed up to 100,000—of defenseless Christians were slaughtered by fanatical Muslims. Stanford Shaw, a US historian of the Ottomans, insists that no more than 4,000 Bulgarian Christians were killed in that incident and that considerably more Muslims died. This led to the instrumentalization of massacres as a tool to polarize external perception of the Balkans; they played a decisive role in shaping public opinion in the West.

The reporting of the Bulgarian April Uprising of 1876 also set another pattern in Western attitudes toward the Balkans that persists to this day, Glenny writes. “Little sympathy is expressed for the victims of conflict if they belong to the national community which is considered the original aggressor.”

One month after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, the Austrians began the Great War by attacking Belgrade. The Habsburgs intended to eliminate Serbia, considering it a destabilizing influence on the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Germans were keen to see Serbia subdued for strategic reasons: Berlin’s push into the Middle East required the control of land and rail routes to Istanbul and Baghdad that passed through the length of Serbia. Within weeks the rest of Europe was engulfed in the conflict, which resulted in unprecedented casualties.

The Great War was marked by extraordinary violence in the Balkans. After the Serbian Army repulsed the Austrian invasion and sent the Austrians fleeing across the Danube and Sava rivers, compelling evidence of atrocities in a number of cities and towns initially seized by the invaders was discovered: hundreds of Serbs

summarily executed, women and children raped and then shot. The Turks unleashed pogroms against the Armenians. Other minorities attracted the full force of the majority's wrath throughout the Balkans; the relatively high incidence of such persecutions and massacres, according to Glenny, was "the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires...which left a complex demographic patchwork within which 'ethnic' violence became lethal." Large-scale violence occurred between Serbs and Albanians, Greeks and Turks, Bulgarians and Serbs, and so on. Murder and expulsion became "the two most overused instruments in dealing with nationality questions in the Balkans." Glenny continues:

All Balkan massacres this century have enjoyed the specific approval of state organs, whose agents have usually been the instigators as well. This is not merely a case of an army commander winking to his troops surrounding defenseless women. In Turkey during the Great War, in Croatia during the Second World War, and in the Republika Srpska during the Bosnian war of 1992-95, the legal system was turned on its head—murder was encouraged and approved by the state and its propaganda apparatus.

After President Woodrow Wilson committed America to the Allies' cause in 1917, he outlined his Fourteen Points and a month later added Four Principles of his approach to peace. But the President was better at pointing out what was desirable than at arranging how to achieve it. While he talked a good deal about the principle of self-determination, the final versions of the eleventh of his Fourteen Points clearly favored the claims of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, which had fought on the Allied side. It specified, among other things, that "Serbia be accorded free and secured access to the sea," which meant Serbia's territorial expansion to Bosnia and parts of Dalmatia. The claims of three Balkan states that had joined the winning side, Glenny notes, "clearly took precedence over principles of ethnically defined self-determination."

In contrast to the Congress of Berlin, Wilson's vision provided a voice and hitherto unimaginable legitimacy to the claims of small nations. But the President had to deal with a Republican-controlled Senate, and the Republicans were determined to block the centerpiece of his effort, the League of Nations, which was supposed to support his entire project for a better and more peaceful world. A troublesome conflict surfaced between the aims of what was known as the "old diplomacy" of Europe's imperial powers and Wilson's "new diplomacy." The former conjured up the image of imperialist pressures, secret treaties and skulduggery; the latter presented itself as principled and open.

When the Versailles peace conference was convened, the vanquished powers were not invited. They would be summoned only once the various pacts affecting them directly had been drawn up. "Somewhere on the hazardous road from the Congress of Berlin, the precious right of defeated parties to negotiate a peace settlement had been lost," Glenny writes. "They were given no right either to offer factual advice or to contest the final provisions of the Peace," which insured its long-term failure in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria. Russia, too, did not attend the conference, because it had a Communist government.

The Balkans presented the peace conference with a complex mess of ethnic, territorial and constitutional issues that demanded more time and effort than any other question. The region also involved territorial claims in the wake of the collapse of two empires—the Habsburg and the Ottoman. A new player, Italy, openly stated predatory territorial demands on Yugoslavia and Albania. As soon as the armistice with Austria-Hungary was signed, Italian troops poured into Istria, Dalmatia and the Dalmatian islands, demanding more territory and emboldened by the forces of extreme Italian nationalism. Dreaming of a new Roman Empire, Italy landed troops on the coast of Turkey. So did the Greeks, encouraged by Britain. Romania, ignoring the appeals of the great powers, invaded Hungary, which was temporarily under Communist control.

With the peace settlement finally adopted, the Balkans entered a period of reconstruction, but territorial and ethnic disputes remained unsettled. Between 34 and 50 percent of national budgets were spent on the military throughout the Balkans, except in Bulgaria, which was permitted by the treaty only a token defense force. With such military expenditures, new parliamentary democracies had very little chance of success, lacking as they did approximate economic equality and an educational system to promote tolerance.

The strains within multi-ethnic Yugoslavia (ruled by the Serbian king) were visible from the beginning. Apart from internal instability, Yugoslavia was the subject of territorial designs on the part of all its neighbors except Greece. Mussolini's Italy actively supported Croatian secessionists. The outbreak of World War II produced a new wave of ethnic retribution and massacres in Yugoslavia, directed mainly against Serbs, Jews and Gypsies. The orgy of killing was carried out by Serbia's neighbors—Hungarians, Bulgarians, Croats and Albanians—as well as by the Germans and Italians. In almost every part of the former Yugoslavia, governance was replaced by state terror on a horrifying scale. Those who found themselves under Italian rule were the least unfortunate.

The new Croatian state, run by a gang of fascist thugs brought to power by German guns and Italian politicians, announced its plans to “solve” the Serbian question and quickly moved to implement it: One-third of the 2 million Serbs in Croatia were to be expelled, one-third assimilated through conversion to Catholicism and one-third killed. More than half of the 40,000 Jews who lived in Croatia were slaughtered; others were sent to labor camps. Some 1,500 Jewish girls and women were held at the Loborgrad camp, where they were routinely raped.

In Serbia, which was under direct German rule, tens of thousands of Serbs were murdered due to Hitler's notorious order that 100 Serbs be killed for the death of a single German and fifty if a German was wounded by resistance fighters. In one town, where the Germans suffered ten dead and twenty-six wounded, the

Wehrmacht could fill the required quota only by going to the local high school and executing students together with their teachers. Glenny also offers compelling evidence that the Wehrmacht planned and carried out the murder of more than 20,000 Serbian Jews and Gypsies without any prompting, an action that gives “the lie to Wehrmacht claims that it took no part in the genocidal programs of the Nazis.” The Germans were assisted by several thousand ethnic Germans in Belgrade as well as by members of the small Serbian fascist movement.

After gunning down more than 10,000 Jewish men, the German Army refused to execute women and children, on the grounds that it was dishonorable; instead, they were gassed to death inside a special “delousing truck.” Of the 8,000 women and children held in a camp at Sajmiste, only six remained alive; all six were foreign citizens married to Serbian Jews.

This helps explain why, uniquely in fascist Europe, Serbs were the first to mount organized resistance, either by joining the royalist Chetniks or the Communist Partisans, and were joined by relatively large numbers of Yugoslav Jews. It also explains why Marshal Tito and his Communists were able to seize power in Belgrade in 1944 without Communist Russia’s assistance.

Glenny’s otherwise excellent book seems to run out of steam in the last chapter, which shows signs of haste. In dealing with the most recent events he is less satisfactory, in contrast to his firm grasp of historical facts in the preceding chapters. For all his insights, Glenny does not provide a clear view as to what would have been an intelligent and constructive Western response to the outbreak of wars in the former Yugoslavia. The West did not cause them; and while subsequent Western involvements did indeed frequently make matters worse, that was more the result of diplomatic ineptitude and domestic political considerations than ulterior imperial designs in Washington, London and Paris.

We are now stuck in the Balkan morass without an exit strategy or a credible political program. The only constructive way out lies in sustained economic and political reconstruction of the entire

region. One can make a strong case for political and economic restitution; in the long run this would serve the interests of Europe and the United States. Failure to engage the region actively will insure more civil strife, more nationalist vengeance, less stability and decades of Western military presence to keep the peace. At least, in dealing with the realities and hypocrisies of past international events, Glenny swings the pendulum in the right direction. Few people writing on the Balkans during the past decade have been able to resist the fashionable spin of the moment; Glenny did. This makes *The Balkans* very well worth reading.

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