

# The New Barbarism: Ethnic Ferment in the Balkans

The moral and political vacuum left by the collapse of the Communist order in the Balkans has been filled by nationalist passions. Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* tries to make sense of the ethnic hatred and violence which threatens to engulf the entire region.

***Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*  
by Robert D. Kaplan. St. Martin's Press, 1993. \$29.99.**

by Jeffrey Thomas Kuhner

Drawing from widespread travel experiences in the Balkans and an eclectic reading-list of histories, biographies and travel-books, Robert Kaplan has written an incisive analysis of the current political and historical forces sweeping the Balkan peninsula. Kaplan's background as a journalist and travel-writer—as opposed to being a Balkan scholar—underlies both the strengths and weaknesses of *Balkan Ghosts*. While his individual sections on the countries occupying the Balkans—former Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, European Turkey and Greece—are insightful and crucial in understanding the present political situation throughout the region, the unifying message of the work is flawed.

To understand the Balkans, we are told, one must accept that events there are driven by “age-old ethnic hatreds”. As an explanation of Balkan society and history this is too simple and too inaccurate an answer. With the present war raging in Bosnia-Herzegovina, this sort of historical interpretation is not only wrongheaded, it can also have dangerous consequences.

## The Modern Roots of the Third Balkan War

One cannot deny the forces of history—the development of different social and political cultures among different peoples and the expansion and contraction of past

empires. Nonetheless, the present ethnic animosity in the Balkans, especially the Bosnian war (and the preceding Croatian one), is a modern phenomenon. It derives from the interaction of the nineteenth century belief in the sanctity of the ethnically homogeneous nation-state and the legacy of communism.

Today, in the former Communist states of Southeastern Europe, calls are heard for a pure single-ethnic state. Such extreme nationalist demands are possible because of the intellectual and moral void fostered by four-and-a-half decades of Communist rule. Kaplan graphically depicts the crumbling buildings and ecological pollution that act as ever-present reminders of the Communist devastation to the region's economic infrastructure

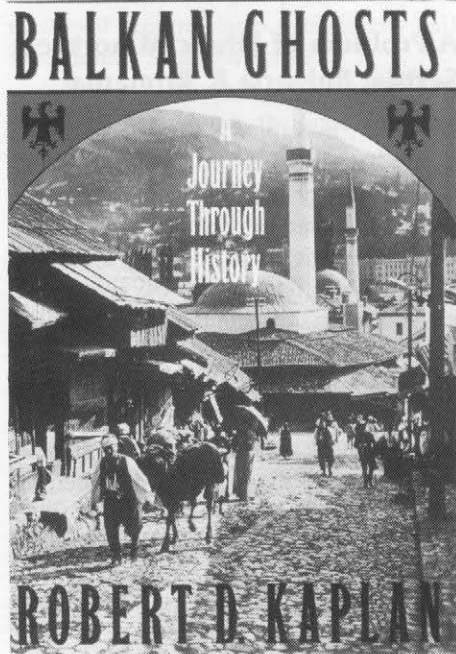
and social fabric.

In some states, like Romania and Bulgaria, this collective cultural and political vacuum is gradually being filled by the revival of the Orthodox Christian faith. However, in others, like Serbia, such ultra-nationalists as Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic have occupied the void with artificially stimulated Serbian nationalism and xenophobia (through the control of the televised media), in the hope of creating an ethnically pure Greater Serbian state.

The use (and distortion) of ancient history and mythology by ultranationalist leaders as a tool to foster ethnic hatred and chauvinism in the service of contemporary political goals is a modern phenomenon. Not understanding this, Kaplan perceives the ethnic conflicts fermenting throughout the Balkans today as proof of profound and long simmering hatreds.

Although recognizing the savage and perverse effects of totalitarian socialism upon Balkan society, Kaplan insists that Bosnia (which he does not discuss at great length) is “full of suspicions and hatreds”. Yet, with the exception of both World Wars—caused by foreign forces and influences—little evidence exists to suggest that Bosnia was plagued historically by ethnic hatred. While there was considerable violence during the 18th and early 19th centuries, it tended not to be ethnic in nature but rather agrarian class conflicts between serfs and landowners.

Kaplan further misinterprets former Yugoslavia in the chapter on Croatia. This is especially true in his treatment of



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the brutal Nazi-puppet Ustasa state erected in Croatia during World War II, which he believes "serves as the elemental symbol of the Serb-Croat dispute, around which every other ethnic hatred in this now-fragmented, the largest and most definitive of Balkan nations, is arranged."

Few Balkan analysts would describe the Ustasa period as typical of Croatian history and society. Much of the ideology of the Ustasa was borrowed from abroad (Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany). When installed in power, the government had only 12,000 members throughout the country and relied on foreign armies (specifically those of Germany and Hungary) to cement its position. Along with Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies, many of its victims were anti-fascist Croats.

Prior to World War I, while there were disagreements and confrontations, there are few examples of an elemental *hatred* between Serbs and Croats. Only with the creation of Yugoslavia in 1918, and the bringing of Serbs and Croats together for the first time in one state, did a full blown Serb-Croat dispute develop. And here lies the crux in understanding the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The central problem with the Yugoslav state was the numerical and political domination of Serbs over Croats, and the attendant threat and rivalry the minority Croats felt. Conversely, the central ethnic dilemma posed by an independent Croatian state is the numerical and political superiority of Croats over the Krajina Serbs.

Kaplan notes that the primary reason for the inability of Serbs and Croats to coexist within the same political entity, is that they have developed distinct political and social cultures. The Serbs are essentially Byzantine, Orthodox, and Ottoman in their outlook. While the Croats are more closely part of the Roman Catholic, Central-European civilization. Kaplan quotes a ordinary Croat:

When I entered the Yugoslav army, I met Serbs for the first time in my life. They told me that a traditional Serbian wedding lasts four days. Four days of prayers and feasting. Who needs that? One day is enough. After that you should go back to work. The Serbs struck me as weird, irrational, like Gypsies. They actually liked the army. How can anyone like the army! I hated the army. The army for Slovenes and Croats is a

waste of time; we could be out making money instead. Who wants to go to Belgrade? Belgrade's the Third World. I feel much closer to Vienna.

Because Yugoslavia was composed of national groups with distinct and divergent political, economic, social, and religious cultures, there was an historic logic to its eventual breakup.



[Electromap, Inc.]

### A Problem of Ethnic Minorities: Serbia, Bulgaria & Romania

However, if Kaplan's thesis of ancient ethnic hatred being the driving force of Balkan history is fundamentally flawed, there are some perceptive and vitally important insights permeating the book. The one most relevant for the near future is the dilemma of ethnic minorities in the region. Kaplan argues that the most immediate threat to regional security and stability is the problem of Kosovo (or Old Serbia). Serbs regard Kosovo as the cradle of their civilization. It was there in *Kosovo Polje* ("Field of Black Birds") that the Turks, on June 28th, 1389, delivered the fatal blow to the Serbian medieval kingdom, launching a 500-year period of Ottoman occupation.

Serbs view the nearly two million Muslim Albanians living in Kosovo (called Kosovars, between 80% to 90% of the population) as foreigners in Serbia's historic heartland and remnants of Ottoman subjugation. It was in that area on the June 28th anniversary, 1987, that Serbian Communist party leader, Slobodan Milosevic, pointed his finger towards *Kosovo Polje* and pledged that "nobody, either now or in the future, has the right to beat you." While Serb leaders strive to defend fellow Serbs from presumed ethnic discrimination, the Kosovars have responded to the Serb crack down by waging their own intifada and have set up their own government.

As Kaplan notes, the plight of the Kosovars has not been missed in neighboring Albania. With the collapse of Enver Hoxha's Stalinist regime and the reversion of Albania's self-imposed isolation, Kosovo and the Kosovars' revolt against the Serbs is now dominating Albania's political agenda.

### Bulgaria

Kaplan believes that Soviet domination of Bulgaria during the Cold War era held Turkish influence in the region in check, a fact welcomed by Bulgars tired of the long period of Ottoman domination (which ended only in the late 19th century). With its size and larger population, combined with a relatively free-market economy, Turkey is poised to re-extend its political and economic sphere of influence over Bulgaria.

In 1985, in a pre-emptive act, Bulgarian Communist authorities forcibly began changing the names of the 900,000 ethnic Turks living in Bulgaria (10 percent of the total population). Much worse, thousands of rapes, murders, and expulsions were committed in Turkish villages throughout the country. As a Bulgarian official explained:

The state has to protect the interests of the nation, and in the Balkans a nation means one particular ethnic group. Keeping the peace in this region means that every minority has to be completely assimilated into the majority.

### Transylvania

Problems with ethnic minorities also lie at the core of the conflict between Hungary and Romania. Kaplan asserts that during

the Cold War the border between Hungary and Romania—two Warsaw Pact allies—was one of the meanest frontier crossings in Europe (worse even than the Berlin Wall). The cause of the dispute is Transylvania, the region which contains the bulk of the 2.1 million Hungarians living in Romania (one of Europe's largest ethnic minorities).

For Hungarians, Transylvania was the region where their most famous victories over the Ottomans took place and where democratic insurgencies against Austrian rule led to the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy in 1867. Transylvania was ceded to Romania after the First World War and, with a brief hiatus during World War II, has remained in their hands since.

Romania's postwar Communist governments—especially the repressive regime of late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu—pursued a policy of systematic discrimination against the Hungarian population in Transylvania. Ceausescu, a Romanian nationalist, sought to eradicate Hungarian culture and society in his nation. He banned the public use of the Hungarian language and shut down Hungarian schools and newspapers. He attempted to alter the demographic balance by relocating Hungarians out of Transylvania into other parts of Romania while transferring Wallachian and Moldavian workers into Transylvania.

To this day, tension remains high between Romanians and Hungarians (especially with the local government) in Transylvania. In Budapest, nationalists and revanchists are demanding the return of Transylvania to Hungary in the name of a "Greater Hungary."

### Greece and Macedonia: A Larger Balkan War?

The best section of Kaplan's book is the one concerning Greece (not surprisingly, considering he lived there for much of the 1980s). Just as the legacy of Communism is crucial to understanding the other Balkan countries, the rule of the Socialist former Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreu (1981-1990), is integral to the understanding of Greek political culture. Kaplan argues that Greece, considered by many to be the birthplace of Western civilization, is fundamentally Byzantine and Ottoman in its world outlook. In the words of one of Athens' leading pollsters:

In our politics, I would say we are completely Oriental. We look at the West like Middle Easterners. Like the Arabs, we [as Orthodox Christians] were also victims of the Crusaders....Greeks are married to the East. The West is our mistress only. Like any mistress, the West excites and fascinates us, but our relationship with it is episodic and superficial.

During the 1980s, Papandreu replicated the Balkan pattern of stimulating xenophobic nationalism and tribalism to perpetuate his grip on power. Preaching a virulent anti-Americanism and flouting Greece's democratic institutions, Papandreu embraced the likes of Ceausescu and Colonel Qaddafi and helped to turn Athens into one of the terrorist capitals of Europe.

As Kaplan notes, the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia is another salient example of the present political illness inflicting much of the Balkan peninsula: a ruthless revanchism by which nations claim as its natural territory all the lands that it possessed during the period of its greatest historical expansion. Macedonia is the most volatile area in the Balkans because it threatens to bring Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece into a wider Balkan war.

Since Macedonia was part of the Bulgarian medieval kingdoms in both the tenth and thirteenth centuries, Bulgarian irredentists regard Macedonia as "Western Bulgaria." However, because Macedonia was conquered by Serbia's King Stefan Dushan in the fourteenth century and formed an integral part of Serbia's medieval empire, Serb nationalists call Macedonia "Southern Serbia."

Although making no territorial claims on Macedonia, the Greek government refuses to recognize the sovereignty of the republic—and has stalled European Community recognition—as long as it continues to use the name "Macedonia". The Greeks believe that it is an usurpation of Greece's cultural heritage—Macedonia is associated by Greeks with Alexander the Great—and fear that Slav-Macedonians have territorial ambi-

tions on Greece's northern province which bears the same name.

### The Need For a Comprehensive Western Strategy

Unless the Western powers develop a more forceful and coherent policy towards Macedonia—and the entire Balkan peninsula—an all-encompassing regional war is likely to occur. First, and foremost, the West must understand that as the old Communist structures begin to be dismantled in post-Soviet Europe, transnational entities will inevitably disintegrate into their constituent parts (for example, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia). Although this process is messy it does not have to be violent, if it is done through democratic means (witness Czechoslovakia, thus far).

The West should support and cultivate the development of democracy in the Balkans since this will ensure longer-term regional stability and security. To do so, the principle that territorial borders cannot be altered through military aggression must be established. Milosevic should not be allowed to forge a Greater Serbia; Bosnia-Herzegovina should not be allowed to be partitioned by the Croats and Serbs; and Macedonia's territorial integrity should be preserved.

Also, the West must make it clear to all Balkan states or would-be-states, that respect for the rights of ethnic minorities is a prerequisite to becoming incorporated into the European community of nations. Unless Western policy makers develop a normative system of order and legality in the Balkans and Eastern Europe—and quickly—social disarray and brutal ethnic conflict will continue to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of communism. ●



Modern hatreds and Balkan Ghosts.  
[Kirk Anderson]