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# The Ottoman Balkans, 1750–1830

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*Edited by*

Frederick F. Anscombe



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Princeton

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## Introduction

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FREDERICK F. ANSCOMBE

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The papers presented in this volume operate in the widening gap between the recent trajectory of Ottoman studies and a continuing path of Balkan historical studies. Over the past two decades a number of Ottomanists have published studies which challenge, with varying degrees of success, the assumptions and conclusions crafted by previous generations of noted scholars. One of the shibboleths to come under concerted attack is the old notion of a long Ottoman “decline” beginning in 1566, the year of Süleyman the Magnificent’s death.<sup>1</sup> While some Ottomanists continue to debate a more appropriate date to mark the onset of “decline,” it now seems acceptable among others to question the very notion of decline at any point in the empire’s history. Such developments in the field of Ottoman history seem to have had less impact upon Balkan studies than might be expected, however. Although there are now very promising junior scholars in several countries of southeastern Europe who approach the Ottoman period with open minds, and some admirable work of high quality and nuance has been published since the end of the Cold War,<sup>2</sup> much of what has been produced concerning the Ottoman period still seems restricted by the conventions of “national” history and too often ignores Ottoman sources, let alone recent work in the wider field of Ottoman studies. It is significant that perhaps the

most noted work of Ottoman Balkan history to appear in recent years was a reissue of L. S. Stavrianos's monumental *The Balkans Since 1453*, originally published in 1958, a book meticulous in tracing national histories of certain (generally Christian) groups but less so with Muslims, particularly any who could fall into the broad category of "Turks."<sup>3</sup> They are the eternal interlopers, regardless of how many generations of them were born, lived, and died in southeastern Europe, the dead wood obscuring the view of the (national) forest.

The tenacity of the "Ottoman period as  $x$  centuries of darkness for nation  $y$ " paradigm is reflected also in recent works which have attempted to explain southeastern Europe to a wide audience, drawn to the region by the recent wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration. Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* is the best-known of these. In a sense, the history recounted in *Balkan Ghosts* is rubbish (dangerously so, since the author writes compellingly—suspicion remains strong that President Bill Clinton long delayed American intervention in the Yugoslav wars because Kaplan's book taught him that oppression, murder, rape, and pillage were just Balkan traditions from time immemorial). Yet, in another sense, *Balkan Ghosts* is quite illuminating, because Kaplan talked to people in the region and simply parrots the popular beliefs drummed into them from an early age by aggressively nation-building school curricula, literature, and folklore.<sup>4</sup> Misha Glenny, another journalist, performs a similar service in his book *The Balkans, 1804–1999* by retelling the grisly tales drawn from published works on the history of southeastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Works by academics are not necessarily any more rigorous in their search for evidence and interpretation. Andre Gerolymatos recently published a study of the roots of that supposedly endemic Balkan tendency to war in which he proved himself just as ready to revel in bloodthirsty (but often apocryphal) stories of the Turkish yoke as did Kaplan and Glenny. While Gerolymatos does occasionally acknowledge the existence of recent scholarship challenging the old Balkan paradigm of the Ottomans, he does not use any of it to challenge the myths he prefers. "[Nationalist] folklore so often distorts the historical reality. But that doesn't mean that myths and legends offer no insights into the past."<sup>6</sup> Yet unsubtle folklore more clearly offers insights into present beliefs rather than past "reality," and Gerolymatos's implication that the Yugoslav wars of disintegration can be blamed upon the Ottoman yoke seems, itself, both simplistic and ahistorical.

Those readers afraid of drowning in my personal pool of pessimism will no doubt welcome a lifeline. As stated before, there are scholars in southe-

astern Europe who, having been freed of the old Marxist straitjacket, are now more than ready to test assumptions of this remaining pillar of history under the old regimes, nationalism. They face daunting challenges, including the financial and other problems besetting the educational systems in most of these countries. Even in North America, where a dissertation on the Ottoman Balkans all too often serves as a one-way ticket out of academia,<sup>7</sup> at least a few researchers have been open to new ideas about the Ottoman period. At the same time as the Gerolymatos book appeared, Dennis Hupchick published a survey of Balkan history. It included the following assessment of "decline."

Historians traditionally characterize the period beginning with the death of Suleyman I in 1566 and extending through the eighteenth century as one of Ottoman decline. The word "decline" implies that factors inherent to the Ottomans' society led to its gradual deterioration, with deleterious effects on the empire's internal administration, its international position, and the condition of its assorted subjects. Ottoman society's institutions, [which functioned so well for 250 years] . . . did slowly begin to unravel following the mid-sixteenth century. Little evidence exists, however, to suggest that they did so on their own account and of their own accord. Compounding forces exerted by the Ottomans' Western European antagonists primarily were responsible for that development. Rather than "decline", it is more accurate to speak of Ottoman internal "destabilization", a result of consistent external, Western European economic and military-technological pressures. Either way, the period left a lasting negative legacy on the empire's Balkan subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Hupchick has considered recent additions to Ottoman historiography, it behooves Ottomanists to think carefully about the quotation above. While the old long-decline paradigm needed revision, it would be just as misguided to overlook the fact that many parts of the empire endured extended periods of turmoil in the second half of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth centuries. This era saw large-scale Christian uprisings (the first not prompted by the approach of foreign armies since the fifteenth century), of Serbs in 1804 and of Greeks in 1821. It also witnessed the violent overthrow and deaths of two sultans, Selim III and Mustafa IV in 1807–8. This extended turmoil ushered in and legitimated the age of rapid, far-reaching reforms, begun symbolically by the destruction of the





