

**Wachtel, Andrew B. *The Balkans in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 176pp. ISBN 13: 9780195338010. Language: English.**

Slavic studies scholar Andrew B. Wachtel's short and comprehensive account of the history of the Balkans from ancient Roman times to the Kosovo war is an excellent example of engaging story-telling in the best sense of the word. Wachtel skillfully combines political, socio-economic and cultural analysis in order to present a smooth, yet complex account of the region's history. The volume is a part of the *New Oxford World History* series, a fresh initiative of Oxford University Press which aims to provide readers with high quality and accessible synthetic works on a wide range of topics. In line with the series' philosophy, Wachtel's book combats negative stereotypes about the Balkans as the land of ancient hatred and of a half-exotic, half-barbaric population. He therefore does something that has kept other specialists in the field occupied for the last decade or so (ever since Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) came out). Their efforts, however worthy, have not been completely successful. Wachtel takes up the difficult task and completes it in a seemingly impossible 125 page narrative.

The introduction concisely presents and summarizes Wachtel's main argument, which is as scholarly as it is political, and does not leave much space for misinterpreting the author's intent. The Balkans is presented as "the borderland where four of the world's greatest civilizations overlapped to produce a dynamic, sometimes combustible, multilayered local civilization" (p.1). The Balkans becomes *the Balkans* when, under the influence of nationalism and ideals of homogeneous nation-states arriving from Western Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> c., its political, ethnic, cultural, religious, etc. complexity and heterogeneity turned into a problem rather than a simple fact of life for the region. Today, according to the author, we witness how the Balkans has become Southeast Europe as a result of the successful eradication of a greater part of its former diversity.

Wachtel's book provides a compelling counter-narrative to narrow nationalist or simply nation-centered approaches and traditions of historical writing on the one hand, and to the sensational accounts of Balkan cruelties and exoticism of the 1990s on the other. In five chronological chapters Wachtel substantiates the claim put forward in the introduction with historical evidence woven in a smooth, yet not overly simplistic narrative. With profound interest in the region's culture, Wachtel argues that it is precisely the mix of civilizations, diverse influences, and shared cultural and social practices that defines the Balkans as a specific space. It is the legacy of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires that forms the core of this mix. He indicates historical continuities where appropriate, for instance the lack of urbanization from the time Roman towns were plundered by Slavs to the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. But he also challenges widespread acceptance of "false" continuities, such as the "natural" link between the early medieval Slavic states and modern nations. He connects ancient history to today's political realities, be it in the form of the diplomatic dispute over the name of Macedonia, or the Albanians' claims to direct ancestry from the Illyrians.

Weaknesses come hand in hand with the book's strengths. While the Balkans is presented as a fascinating space, the diversity of which is hard to explain fully, the overall historical account lacks "drama," and more often than not, important if disturbing details are sacrificed for the sake of a smooth and balanced narrative. The book presents an impartial picture (somewhat of a rarity in the field of Balkan studies), but by doing so it downplays the scale of political and emotional tension that has been characteristic of the region for more than two hundred years. All of this, however, is a question of taste and style.

There is a more profound, methodological issue that deserves attention, namely how to create a synthetic narrative without leveling the differences between cultures, people, nations?

*The Balkans in World History* creates a synthesis by placing emphasis on the common denominator, the mixed and layered culture of the region in the broad sense of the term, and the shared historical trajectory of the Balkan states. The focus on culture seems to be a wise choice, as it allows to keep otherwise very different narratives together. In this perspective Greece, for instance, rightfully occupies an important place as one of the richest cultures of the region, despite its different political trajectory. However, the argument of a common historical trajectory, which comes to the fore in the discussion of the twentieth century, is more problematic.

Wachtel essentially claims that after WWII and particularly in the last two decades, Balkan nations became more homogenized, and the region as a whole was transformed “from an exotic, thoroughly marginal, semicolonialized third world into an integral part of Europe” (p. 99). A very similar argument was put forward earlier by John Lampe in *Balkans into Southeastern Europe: A Century of War and Transition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), whom Wachtel quotes in the title of his last chapter. While Lampe’s claim that the twentieth century Balkans generally followed a European path was based on thorough socio-economic analysis, Wachtel expands this argument into the political sphere. He does so somewhat unreflexively, and while *the Balkans* as a concept is problematized throughout the book, *Southeastern Europe* is taken as an innocent notion, which it doubtfully is. There might also appear a reasonable doubt whether the EU membership of Balkan states is indeed a proof of incorporation into Western Europe and the victory of liberal democracy.

The chronological structure of the book does not account for the lack of synchronicity within the Balkans, which seems to be an important and unfortunate omission. Another troubling aspect is the presence of generalized “Europe”/“Western Europe” as a reference point for

modern Balkan elites attempting to catch up with it during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Such picture seems overly simplified. There is no doubt that “catching up” with (more advanced) “Europe” was an important dimension of modern Balkan history. It was, however, not the only dimension, and critical reflections on contemporary notions of the “West,” and the relationship of a given state/national culture to political modernity as exemplified by Western Europe constitute the essence of Balkan political and economic thought in the modern period. A change of perspective from “catching up” to “critical reflection” would, perhaps, do more justice to the subjects of the book. Such a shift would also allow for the incorporation of important aspects otherwise missing from the narrative, such as peasant and agrarian political ideologies, federalist projects, and socialism.

Lastly, there is an unfortunate and insignificant, but obvious mistake in the translation of the inscription that appears on the painting featured on the front cover. The text mixes the title of the painting “Illyria reborn by Napoleon’s hand” with the actual inscription, which should be translated as “Raise, Illyria, Napoleon is calling” (p. 75).

*The Balkans in World History* is intended for students of world history and is very usable for teaching undergraduate classes. There are other brief accounts of Balkan histories that are no less useful such as *The Balkans: A Short History* by Mark Mazower (2000), *Balkans into Southeastern Europe* by John R. Lampe (2006), and *History of the Balkans* by Barbara Jelavich (1983). However, these titles are older, more specialized, longer and heavier in style. Wachtel’s book serves as a very good historical introduction into the region for those non-historians/non-specialists who are tired of the journalistic accounts of “ancient hatred” and “eternal enemies.” It is a highly readable book; the author is a literary scholar and makes perfect use of his knowledge by bringing the region closer to the reader through its rich literary tradition. A chronological

table and a brief “further reading” section are a useful addition for those who want to systematize and deepen their knowledge about the region. Ultimately, it does not fill an important gap in the scholarly knowledge, but it undoubtedly compliments the existent body of synthetic literature intended for a non-specialist audience.

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