



Miranda Vickers. *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. xix + 328 pp. \$29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11383-0; \$73.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11382-3.

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## Everything Started with Kosovo

“Everything started with Kosovo, and everything will finish with Kosovo.”

The truth of this quotation about the breakup of Yugoslavia, which Miranda Vickers uses as the title of her book’s last chapter, is beginning to be recognized around the world. Among the many problems plaguing the Balkans today, Kosovo is the “Stealth Bomber”: until now it has shown up on the radar screens of very few people outside the region, but it carries the potential to demolish the current international order of the peninsula. Now that this potential is belatedly being recognized, various governments are scrambling to find effective means to neutralize the threat, but most of their schemes sound like wishful thinking, at best. And, like the U.S. Air Force’s Stealth Bomber, the Kosovo problem took an awfully long time to develop. Vickers attempts to walk her readers through the history of that development.

Given the popular interest in (and even greater ignorance about) Kosovo and the rest of the Balkans, there should be a ready audience for her book. Since opposing Serbian and Albanian views of the region’s history are key elements in the conflict, a clear, critical account by an impartial observer would be of great help to anyone interested in the problem and in its eventual just solution. The instructional and marketing opportunities open to *Between Serb and Albanian*, however, only serve to make its shortcomings particularly disappointing.

Vickers’s basic premise is that the Serb-Kosovar conflict is of fairly recent origin, Serb and Albanian natives long having lived in relative harmony, and that outside powers and nationalist interest groups have been responsible for importing the intercommunal tensions (pp. xi-xii). She examines relations between the groups and the influence of outside powers in three phases, to each of which she devotes roughly one hundred pages.

The first phase stretches from Bronze-Age Illyria and Dardania to Kosovo’s exit from the Ottoman Empire in

the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. Although this section of the book is a bit shorter than those devoted to the twentieth century, the historical controversies it addresses are tremendously important to all sides’ perceptions of the conflict. The importance of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 as the touchstone of modern Serbian nationalism is well known, and the Serbian view of this event receives adequate attention. As for the Albanian Kosovars’ view of their stake in the region, they consider themselves to be the direct descendants of its earliest inhabitants and thus to be the true “natives” of Kosovo. This view seeks historical roots, and thus legitimacy in the world’s eyes, for the Kosovars’ overwhelming demographic dominance today. The Serbs, however, believe that Kosovo was essentially uninhabited when the Slavs arrived in the sixth century, and that the Muslim Albanians took advantage of Ottoman support to move into the area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In direct contrast to the Kosovar view, the Serbs thus consider the Albanians to be the interlopers.

Although acknowledging that neither side enjoys an irrefutable case, Vickers deems the Serbian one more credible. In an issue related to the question of the origins of the Albanian population, the author also examines the introduction of Islam into the region. Here, too, she tends toward a Serbian view, positing widespread forced conversions to Islam among Serbs as well as Albanians. The Serbian converts were then supposedly absorbed into the Albanophone Muslim community. Vickers thus seems to be one of the few non-Serbs to accept the theory that many Kosovars (like Bosnian Muslims) are really Serbs whom “the Turks” forced to give up their national identity (pp. 22-28).

Much of the section covering the Ottoman phase of Kosovo’s history details the decline of the empire after the sixteenth century, the worsening of living conditions for the local population, and the growth of Albanian nationalism over the half-century before World War I. The

author never makes clear the relevance of this discussion of Albanian nationalism to her topic, however, since she states that as late as 1908 the Kosovars were not nationalists but rather continued to be pro-Ottoman and pro-Islamic (pp. 54, 64). If the rise of nationalism was so important, moreover, it is odd that the author says virtually nothing about the development of its Serbian version.

The second, or “Yugoslav,” phase of Kosovo’s history begins with its incorporation into the new Kingdom of Yugoslavia following the end of World War I and lasts until 1981. This is the lengthy period of adjustment by both Serbs and Kosovars to the transfer of political, social, and economic dominance from Muslims to Orthodox. The last years of this period saw the establishment of a relatively stable *modus vivendi*, with Kosovo gaining autonomy and Kosovars playing an increasing role in administration and the economy. Much of this phase, however, was marked by tremendous Serbian-Kosovar tension and intercommunal violence. The Serbian occupation of Kosovo in 1918 inaugurated a period of brutal repression, and a Kosovar campaign to win the territory’s union with Albania quickly gained strength. The widespread violence subsided by the end of the 1920s, when the central authorities stamped out the Kosovars’ armed secessionist movement, the *Kachaks*, and turned to other means of strengthening the Serbian position in the region. The measures adopted included banning the use of Albanian in public life, including in schools, almost eliminating educational opportunities for Kosovars, pushing Muslims to emigrate to Turkey, and expropriating Kosovars’ land for redistribution to Serbian and Montenegrin immigrants. These “colonization programs” continued until the Axis occupation of the Balkans in 1941 (pp. 103-120).

Not surprisingly, many Kosovars welcomed the German and Italian occupation forces because they destroyed the repressive interwar monarchy and offered the hope of unification with Albania. The recently-arrived Slav settlers, in their turn, were hounded out. The Kosovars also resisted the reimposition of Yugoslav rule in 1944-45. The new Communist Yugoslav regime declared martial law and eradicated the resistance, killing up to 48,000 Kosovars in six months (pp. 142-143). Thereafter, however, Tito’s government implemented policies that were more likely to keep the peace in Kosovo than those previously tried by the monarchy. Any sign of Kosovar nationalism or secessionism was ruthlessly suppressed—but Serbian nationalism was held in check, too. Except in the mid-1950s, there were no concerted efforts to push Kosovars to emigrate to Turkey or to settle Serbian and Montenegrin immigrants in the region.

Although Kosovo continued to be part of the Republic of Serbia within the Yugoslav federation, it was given some measure of autonomy.

This policy culminated in granting Kosovo status as an autonomous province of Serbia in the 1974 Yugoslav constitution. Thereafter the hitherto small percentage of the provincial Communist party that was Kosovar rose steadily, Albanian gained parity with Serbo-Croatian as an official language, and four-fifths of available public posts were reserved for Kosovars (pp. 179-180). From the late 1960s, the federal government saw Kosovo as a “bridge” for improved relations with neighboring Albania, which helped to solidify these Kosovar gains.

These improvements did not satisfy all Kosovars, many of whom continued to wish for the creation of a greater Albania. Nor did the Albanianization of public life sit well with Serbs. Tito’s death in 1980 encouraged nationalists, who believed that he had systematically stripped Serbs of their rightful role in Yugoslavia’s politics and economy, to try to reassert greater control over Serbian lands, including Kosovo. Kosovar rioting in 1981 over lack of investment in the province gave Belgrade the opportunity to crack down. This marked the beginning of the third phase of Kosovo’s history. Vickers details the Serbian government’s efforts to roll back the gains in education and public life made by Kosovars from 1966 to 1980 and its efforts to strengthen the Serbian population in the province. These efforts naturally led to a worsening of relations between the two ethnic groups.

As is now commonly known, Slobodan Milosevic was able to harness the energy of Serbian dissatisfaction to gain power in Belgrade. Kosovar discontent, on the other hand, led to withdrawal from Yugoslav public life and the creation of a shadow state run by the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), headed by Ibrahim Rugova. The author finds plenty to criticize in the actions of both Milosevic and the LDK. Much of this criticism is certainly deserved, but some of it goes a bit too far. She seems to blame the Kosovars for the stunted development of democracy in Serbia, for instance, because they boycotted Yugoslav and Serbian elections in 1990-1994. Vickers completed the book in January 1998, when the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) came out of the shadows but before the eruption of open warfare. The book thus ends with an accurate note of foreboding about greater violence to come.

Vickers’s handling of post-1981 events makes this the best section of the book. In comparison to the first two hundred pages, it is easy to follow her narrative. She concentrates upon the progressive deterioration of Serbian-

Kosovar relations, and there is a minimum of irrelevant information distracting the reader's attention. There are also fewer logical inconsistencies in this section than in the first two-thirds of the book. Because events in Kosovo have been relatively well covered by the world's press and human rights organizations since 1981, the greater range of sources of information available to Vickers for this period improved both the continuity and, to some degree, the reliability of her narrative.

There are nevertheless some points where the author should be much clearer about the reliability of what she is reporting. For instance, she appears to accept as true reports that in 1993 the LDK shadow government had a regular army of 40,000 men, deployed around Kosovo, and capable of undertaking full-scale offensive military operations (pp. 278-279). Is she one of the few who believe that the UCK is controlled by the LDK? If not, what has happened to this force? The author also seems to confirm stories that in 1981 Kosovars were using rape as a means to pressure Serbs to emigrate, adding only in a footnote that such rumors were untrue (pp. 218-219). In discussing heightened interethnic tension in 1981, Vickers states that a mysterious fire (started by Albanian "irredentists"?) caused serious damage to the old Pec Patriarchate (pp. 197-198). The failure of the police to arrest anyone for the act inflamed Serb public opinion. The author then writes that "according to the Albanians" the fire actually destroyed a modern convent a good distance from the Patriarchate, which was untouched, and that an investigating "Albanian" judge declared that the fire had been caused by an electrical fault. Having strongly implied a Kosovar cover-up of a politically-motivated arson attack on the Patriarchate, the author then adds the unexpected sentence: "Despite the minimal damage, the Federal government allotted surprisingly high funds to restore the convent." Surely she could be clearer in identifying facts and rumors.

The text as a whole, including even the section on recent history, suffers from some deeper flaws, which rob this book of its punch and indeed its credibility. One problem is that the author never really proves convincingly her early statement that the different ethnic communities in Kosovo got along well with each other through most of their history together. That statement is indeed a defensible one, but nationalist ideologies of both Serbs and Albanians rest upon the conviction that the "nation" has been oppressed by others at least since the Ottoman conquest. This point of view, which is reflected in many of the author's sources, can be seen too often in this book. Above and beyond that, however, the lack of information about day-to-day interaction between Kosovo-

vars and Serbs undercuts the idea of historical harmony. The reader gets only a hazy picture of the socio-economic structure of either towns or countryside. Kosovars and Serbs appear to be incorporated in two discrete ethnic blocs, rather than members of interconnected local societies. An even more serious (indeed, fundamental) problem is that the book appears to be a "cut-and-paste job. Vickers copies—practically word for word—passages from other books and articles. These passages can run up to several paragraphs in length. Although some readers will feel more comfortable with the ethics of this practice than will others (Vickers does not use quotation marks but does list the sources of these passages in footnotes), it produces a variety of bad effects that are harder to overlook.

Kosovo is a very controversial subject and, as the author herself notes, most of what Serbian and Albanian scholars have written about it has been tainted by nationalism (p. xii). The claims of both sides need to be used with extreme caution, since much of what has been published is little more than propaganda. Even such basic data as population figures should not be accepted without question. To her credit, the author does note that the universally-reported figure that Albanians comprise 90 percent of Kosovo's population is a statistical projection, since the Kosovars boycotted the 1991 census. According to the publisher's promotional material, a review of the original British edition of this book by *The Economist* stated that "Ms. Vickers has a healthy skepticism towards both Serbian and Albanian claims." This assessment is difficult to accept. If the author had neither the time nor the inclination to summarize in her own words the findings of others, it is hard to believe that she had the time or was willing to think critically about the validity of those findings.

The author's importation of passages from other works also disguises the degree to which she relies upon just a handful of sources. In her discussion of the ethnic composition of early Ottoman Kosovo's population, for example, she reproduces verbatim two paragraphs from Ivo Banac's *National Question in Yugoslavia* [1], including Banac's own footnote referring to another source at the end of the first paragraph (p. 18). Presumably she did not use that source herself, since she does not list it in her bibliography. For the entire half-millennium of "Turkish" rule in Kosovo, the author did not use the work of even one Ottoman historian. Amongst sources that are included in the bibliography, writings by Serbian scholars are very well represented—perhaps because they have published more on Kosovo than have Albanians—and nationalist language imported in passages from their works

can give readers surprising jolts. For example, the author clearly is following Dusan Batakovic, her footnoted source [2], in translating “muhadjir” as “Muslim zealot” on page 55, since she later uses the term in its proper sense of “refugee; emigre” on page 260.

In her discussion of Kosovo during World War II, the author gives inordinate attention to Tito’s Slav Partisans, who by most non-Yugoslav accounts were practically irrelevant to the predominantly Albanian population and the Axis regimes. The degree of her indebtedness to the version of history favored by successive governments in Belgrade is captured beautifully in a sentence on page 130: “The aim [of cooperative moves by the Yugoslav and Albanian Communist Partisans] was clearly stated to be to mobilise the Albanian masses [in Kosovo and Macedonia] who, because of their hatred of the Serbs in these regions, were abstaining from the national liberation struggle.” The obvious question of *whose* “national liberation struggle” the “Albanian masses” were to join is left unaddressed.

Although the author relies upon only a limited number of sources, in a sense it might be preferable were she to rely upon only one. It would reduce the confusion resulting from conflicts of information taken from different sources. What is the average reader, unfamiliar with the career of the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, to make of the passages where this ruler is described as overthrown in 1908 (p. 62), deposed in 1909 (p. 68), and retreating behind the walls of Topkapi palace (sic) in 1912 to plot his and his empire’s survival in the face of rising nationalist threats (p. 72)? For an example at the other extreme, how many readers will be enlightened by the statement that Ahmed Zogu of Albania “had Zia Dibra murdered ‘while attempting to escape’” in 1924 (p. 100)? To discover the identity and importance of Zia Dibra, who is not mentioned elsewhere in the text, one can only go back to the book where this passage originally appeared. In discussing government plans to deport Kosovars to Turkey

in the 1930s, Vickers finishes one paragraph by saying that the plans were not implemented due to lack of funds but then starts the next by saying that the deportations were efficiently organized (p. 118). Such jarring inconsistencies help to make this book very difficult to read.

Because other authors’ words make up a significant portion of the text, Vickers fails to establish her own voice. At times the book reads like a committee report. The narrative lacks a distinctive character for which the reader can establish any strong sense of appreciation or sympathy. A history of Kosovo, targeting a general audience but starting off with a discussion of Bronze-Age Illyrians, Dardanians, and Thracians, needs a compelling author’s voice to keep its readers’ attention.

*Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo* should have been a much better, more effective guide to the continuing troubles in the region. A comment in the author’s “Acknowledgements” suggests that the book was commissioned by the publisher to take advantage of the sudden growth in international attention to the Kosovo problem. Perhaps because of the rush to meet a deadline, the author seems not to have been able to give the project the careful attention it deserves. I consider this a great pity.

#### Notes

- [1]. Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984; paperback edition: 1988).
- [2]. Dusan T. Batakovic, *The Kosovo Chronicles* (Beograd: Plato, 1992).

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