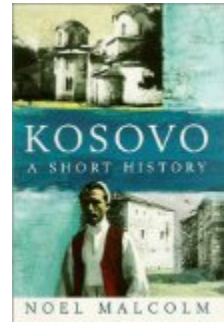


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Noel Malcolm. *Kosovo: A Short History*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. xxxvi + 492 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5598-3.

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Published on HABSBURG (May, 1999)



## Challenging Myth in a Short History of Kosovo

In the conclusion to his new history of Kosovo, Noel Malcolm observes: “Whether Kosovo is brought, in the end, to a peaceful solution, or plunged into a conflict potentially even more deadly than that which was created in Bosnia, will depend to a large extent on the ability of ordinary Serbs to challenge the fixed pattern of thought which has held them in its grip for so long ... When ordinary Serbs learn to think more rationally and humanely about Kosovo, and more critically about some of their national myths, all the people of Kosovo and Serbia will benefit—not least the Serbs themselves” (pp. 355-56). Clearly the few months between the publication of Malcolm’s history and the terrible tragedy that has unfolded in Kosovo these past few weeks were not enough time for Serbs to challenge their “fixed pattern of thought” about Kosovo. But, of course, this alone would not have prevented the disaster we are witnessing today. For any challenge to have been effective it would have had to include the removal of Milosevic from power. It would also have had to assume that some opposition figure in Serbia could lead the new critique of the nation’s myths. None of this happened nor is it likely to happen in the near future.

Perhaps it is somewhat unorthodox to begin a review with a critique of the author’s effort at prophecy in his conclusion, but it is important to note that Malcolm’s essential idea in that conclusion is critical to the entire study. This is a solid history which is, nevertheless, shaped by the author’s own overriding determination to challenge Serbian myths. If the author’s conclusion as summarized above seems to have a certain Op-Ed quality

to it, one finds a similar tendency sprinkled throughout the book. As one of my students remarked last week after finishing the book, “This is a history with an attitude.” That my young student is not alone in his assessment of the book is suggested by the extensive review and uncomfortably polemic discussion of the book which presented itself in the immediate weeks and months after its publication.

Malcolm is not the first historian to take on the powerful mythology of the Serbs. Serbia’s first critical historians in the late nineteenth century (Ruvrarac in particular) devoted years of work to identifying and verifying historical sources. The medieval Battle of Kosovo and the legendary tradition which evolved around it were of particular interest to these historians. They tried to separate fact from fiction, but in the end they were only partially successful. In an article in the Belgrade newspaper, *Politika*, published in 1939 on the 550th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, the prominent Serb medievalist, Mihailo Dinic, concluded that history had not succeeded (and probably never would succeed) in separating the historical Kosovo from the legendary.[1] Whatever happened on the field of Kosovo in 1389 was so wrapped in legend, symbol, and myth that the myth itself had become reality—or at least one version of that reality. If one had attempted to prove that the battle itself was less significant than the myth would concede or that the outcome was possibly debatable given the extant contemporary evidence, Dinic’s compatriots would have dismissed such arguments as incompatible with almost six centuries of Serbian oral tradition. National myths

clearly have a life and reality of their own, and challenging them is a most audacious endeavor.

Noel Malcolm clearly has that audacity in *Kosovo: A Short History*. Published only four years after his first bold step into the murky politics and history of the Balkans (*Bosnia: A Short History* [2]), Malcolm perhaps gives hope to all historians and other scholars who labor endless years in producing definitive studies of their particular regions of the world. Trained as a historian at Cambridge, Malcolm served as foreign editor for the *Spectator* and as a political columnist on the *Daily Telegraph*. That experience served him well in this effort to deal with the contemporary crisis in Kosovo by tackling its complex and controversial history. He has the voice of a journalist, which makes his history highly readable and perhaps even accessible to the broad public. In spite of almost 150 pages of notes, bibliography, and index, this is still a popular work designed to acquaint a general audience with a carefully constructed interpretation of the region's history with a clear eye on the present.

Malcolm suggests that this book needed to be written even if there had been no crisis in present-day Kosovo. Given the paucity of books about Kosovo in western European languages, one cannot disagree with this conclusion. As an introduction to the history of this loosely defined region of the Balkans, Malcolm's study is an impressive and extraordinarily well-written work. Unlike many scholars of the former Yugoslavia, Malcolm is an accomplished polyglot who includes Albanian and Turkish in his linguistic quiver. Such expertise is perhaps the least that one should expect from any scholar who is willing to tackle the thorny issues of state and society in this part of the Balkans in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods. Unfortunately, most of us collapsed from linguistic fatigue after learning Latin, Greek, Old Church Slavonic, and the various Slavic tongues of the Balkans.

Malcolm's concern for a more inclusive bibliography is clearly reflected in the research, scope and argument of this work. He has consulted several critical archives (with the notable and curious exception of Serbian archives) and has amassed a broad and representative body of secondary literature. The primary strength of Malcolm's study is found in his attempt to understand the long centuries of Kosovo history before our own century. Half of the book covers the period before the Serbian revolutions in the early nineteenth century. In fact, Malcolm leaves the twentieth century to the final third of his book and only investigates the post-Tito era in Kosovo in the last brief chapter of the work.

In the first half of the book, Malcolm offers a detailed discussion of the origins of the Albanians and Serbs (and Vlachs and others who have populated the region), the place of Kosovo in medieval Serbia, the Battle of Kosovo and the myth which evolved around it, the character of Ottoman rule in the centuries that followed, the Ottoman-Habsburg war at the end of the seventeenth century and the subsequent Serb migration from Kosovo. In his analysis he tries to offer a critical assessment of the exaggerated claims of both Serbs and Albanians as they construct their own interpretation of the distant past, but he clearly sets his target most often on the Serbs (arguing that their myths are the most entrenched and inherently dangerous). Malcolm's command of the subject and his sources is so excellent that it is surprising that he endangers that authority with his transparent attempt to prove that the main Serbian myths are false. Besides the fact that his analysis will not persuade Serbs and Serb scholars, the analysis itself is simply not convincing.

There appear to be three main targets of his critique of Serbian myth. First, since Nemanjid Serbia had its origins to the north of Kosovo, he refutes the Serbian claim that Kosovo is the "cradle of Serbian civilization." He acknowledges that it became central to the Serbian state (at least geographically) in the thirteenth century, but he doubts that that centrality extended to politics, culture, and economics. He concedes that moving the seat of the Archbishopric (and then Patriarchate) to Pec at the end of the fourteenth century made Kosovo central to the Serbian Church, but he argues that this was only because of an attack on the monastery of Zica by Tatars and Cumans. Perhaps if they had not made that attack, Malcolm observes, "Kosovo would never have acquired the significance which it has gained for modern Serbs" (p. 50). But that is precisely the issue. Kosovo did become the center of the medieval state. More importantly, if modern Serbs see Kosovo as the cradle of their civilization, no hair-splitting argument about the matter will make any difference to them.

The second and most important myth that Malcolm attempts to refute is the ethos surrounding the Battle of Kosovo. While acknowledging that the origins of the myth appeared soon after the battle in religious texts commemorating the Serbian prince who died in the battle and in the evolving oral epic tradition about Kosovo, Malcolm still argues that it was only in the nineteenth century that the "strands of tradition" were transformed into a national ideology. Certainly the advent of nineteenth century nationalism encouraged a renewal of the Kosovo ethos and obvious embellishments to the tradi-

tion, but the Serbs needed far less invention of tradition to encourage a national consciousness. The Kosovo ethos was well established in the epic tradition and in the narrative "Tale about the Battle of Kosovo" long before Vuk Karadzic's day. More importantly, during the nineteenth century Serbian nationalism increasingly emphasized the glory of the Nemanjid period rather than concentrating on the defeat and moral victory at Kosovo. This is evident in the late nineteenth century textbooks of the Serbian schools. One has to assume from Malcolm's conclusion that he believes it will be easier for Serbs to think more critically about this myth if they can be convinced that it is something that has been created for them in the nineteenth century.

The third myth that Malcolm tries to debunk is the celebrated migration of thousands of Serbs from Kosovo to southern Hungary at the end of the seventeenth century led by their patriarch, Arsenije III. Malcolm's fascinating research concludes that the patriarch fled the territory without leading a mass exodus, that the numbers of Serbs who eventually landed in Hungary were fewer than Serb tradition assumes, that most of the Serb refugees were not from Kosovo, and that it was therefore not this event that caused Kosovo to be depopulated of Serbs. While novel and very interesting, Malcolm's analysis is not overwhelmingly convincing. Too few sources make it difficult to accept the broad conclusions he makes. In this long analysis he seems to relish the historian's role of detective, pouncing upon a little known source, and building from it an understanding of history that confounds what Serb historians have argued for decades. His critique here is challenging, however, and clearly invites additional research and discussion.

Malcolm's decision to devote relatively less analysis to the twentieth century is a curious one given the author's sense that most of Kosovo's problems can be traced to this century. As he observes, "There have been many battles and wars in Kosovo over the centuries, but until the last 100 years or so none of them had the character of an 'ethnic' conflict between Albanians and Serbs." (p. xxix) Once he does bring us to the twentieth century, Malcolm chronicles as closely as he can the discrimination, harassment and outright terror directed at Albanians by Serbs. One senses, however, that he is reluctant to examine and document more carefully and critically the Albanians' own serious acts against the Serbs in Kosovo both in this century and during the last decades of Ottoman rule there.

One finds a very different approach in Miranda Vick-

ers' history of Kosovo which appeared about the same time as Malcolm's.[3] Ironically, while Malcolm's is clearly the better history in every way, Vickers offers a much more balanced account of Serb and Albanian relations in Kosovo during the course of the twentieth century and does not minimize "hostile activities" when they were directed against Serbs. Vickers devotes four-fifths of her study to the twentieth century and fully a third of the book to the period since Tito's death. One clearly needs to read both Vickers and Malcolm for a more complete picture of the history of Kosovo, particularly as regards the twentieth century and the roots of the current conflict.

In his introduction to this book, Malcolm assumes that many of his readers will have the current crisis in mind when they read a history of Kosovo. At one level, he argues, "a history of Kosovo has to be defined by questions projected back into the past from the political conditions of the late twentieth century." (p. xxxiv) At the same time he suggests that "it is not the purpose of this book to present a case for or against any particular solution to the Kosovo crisis." (p. xxxii) Nevertheless, his arguments and analysis in this volume and his subsequent more popular writings[4] in which he advocates independence for Kosovo make it difficult to accept his disclaimer. There is little doubt that this book was inspired by the growing crisis in Kosovo in the 1990s; and its arguments are clearly driven by the parameters of that crisis.

Having said all this and having registered some discomfort with the partisan tenor to much of the discussion and analysis in this book, it is important to acknowledge that Malcolm's *Kosovo: A Short History* will undoubtedly remain for a long time the standard history in English for this Balkan territory. It is an exacting and engaging work of serious scholarship which deserves careful reading and continued discussion.

#### Notes:

[1]. Mihailo Dinic, "Istorija jos nije uspela da razluci istorisko Kosovo od legendarnog," *Politika* XXXVI, no. 11160 (28 June 1939), 3.

[2]. Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short Story* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), reviewed on HABSBURG in July, 1995: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=26718850086596>.

[3]. Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo*. New York: Columbia Uni-

versity Press, 1998). See the HABSBERG review by Frederick F. Anscombe (August, 1998): <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=17631903041839>. *Daily Telegraph* (9 July 1998), p. 26.

[4]. See Noel Malcolm, "Kosovo: Only Independence Will Work," *National Interest* 54 (Winter, 1998-1999), pp. 23-26; and Malcolm, "New Conflict, Same Mistakes," *The*

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**Citation:** Thomas Emmert. Review of Malcolm, Noel, *Kosovo: A Short History*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. May, 1999.

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