



Alberto Basciani, Egidio Ivetic, eds. *Italia e Balcani: Storia di una prossimità*. Bologna: Il mulino, 2021. 160 pp. EUR 16.00, paper, ISBN 978-88-15-29225-4.

Reviewed by Stanislav Sretenovic (Institut za savremenu istoriju)

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Italia e Balcani. Storia di una prossimità (Italy and the Balkans: a history of proximity), by Alberto Basciani and Egidio Ivetic, represents a historical and reflective synthesis of the cultural, economic, military, and political relationship, spanning from the Middle Ages to the present day (with the evocation of two thousand years of shared history starting from classical antiquity), between the two closest peninsulas in southern Europe, the Apennines (Italy) and the Balkans. Already the title of the book and the scholarly reputation of its authors attract professionals and the broader public interested in the topic to read this volume in one fell swoop. The volume is the work of two of the leading Italian and European specialists on the history of Italy and eastern and southeastern Europe in their continental and maritime aspects: Basciani is a professor of the history of eastern Europe at University Roma Tre, and E. Ivetic, a professor of modern history and the history of the Mediterranean at the University of Padua. Building on the authors' previous research and publications, this volume includes five chronological and problematizing chapters, of which Ivetic wrote the introduction and the first two, and Basciani chapters 3, 4, and 5, and an exhaustive bibliography at the end divided into twenty or so thematic sections that correspond to all the chapters.

The book deals with the connections and specificities in comparative and long-term perspective between two of Europe's historical regions (*regioni storiche*)—Italy and the Balkans—and theoretically defines them, drawing on, among others, the 2017 edition of *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History* by Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi. Italy and the Balkans are seen as two of the basic territorial units of Europe that require a comparative discourse to explore a range of topics, such as the evolution of the state and its institutions, religious beliefs, cultural transfer, economy, and the environment, which demand contextualization and historical analysis. The premise that these two European regions are territorial and historical and that there is closeness between them denies any sort of teleological, essentialist, or determinist approach. That closeness is seen not only as a geographical and historical category but also as a dynamic philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, and judicial concept of different intermediary actors through time. In fact, the book is not only about the problem of Italy's eastern borders, at Piave, Isonzo, Istria, or Dalmatia, or about the Adriatic, as the "narrow sea" or *mare nostrum*, but mostly about the economy that results from various mutual complementarities and differences and about the circulation of individuals, families, and groups, despite

changing state borders, tensions, and wars. In fact, the volume summarizes the transnational “total history” (*histoire totale*) of Italy and the Balkans, its methodology, and the results of historiography and political science.

However, the authors of the volume are aware that imbalance was the main characteristic, a historical constant, of Italo-Balkan relations in long-lasting processes, in which political initiatives and interests moved from the Italian to the Balkan context and in which the ambitions of both Italian and Balkan individuals, peoples, and states often surpassed their real power and capabilities. Migration, another topic discussed in the volume, went in the opposite direction, from the east to the west, from the Balkans to Italy, regardless of whether it was caused by poverty, economic backwardness, political violence, forcible displacement, or war. The migrations raised the question of integration in societies with a different way of life, heritage, and perception of otherness.

This volume provides a range of examples and interpretations of the evolution and change of mutual perceptions and stereotypes in Italy and the Balkans among cultural and economic actors, scholars, artists, travelers, and military and political decision-makers on both sides. The stereotypical narratives and representations of the Balkans as a territory to be conquered by the Italian nation, recalled in 1908 by Gabriele D’Annunzio in his drama *La nave*, or a similar subject evoked in 1914 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his design *Irredentismo*, were mirrored in the cliché view of Italy as an everlasting menace to the South Slavs evoked by Croatian historians imbued with the ideology of Yugoslavism, such as Grga Novak (1888-1978). The voluntary omission of Italian references by the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža (1893-1981) is also significant: it shows Krleža’s affiliation with the cultural space of Central Europe (Mitteleuropa) but also his alignment with the anti-Italian policy of the Yugoslav communist regime after 1945. After 1945, the historical and cul-

tural discourse based on the Italian conquest of parts of the Balkans changed in Italy with the territorial losses in the eastern Adriatic and the reorientation of the Italian policy of “opening to the East” and cooperation with communist Yugoslavia, a consequence of the “opening to the left” of the Christian-Democratic Party in Italian domestic policy. The discourse and representations changed once again in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of Yugoslavia. While Italy was perceived all over the Balkans as the closest democratic and prosperous neighbor and one of the founding fathers of the European Union to be reached, Italian perceptions of the Balkans followed Italy’s policy of military and peacekeeping intervention in former Yugoslavia and support for the democratic and economic transition of ex-communist Balkan countries.

The book offers an important overview of the Italian experience and knowledge of the Balkans. Even if it came later than in the case of Great Britain or France, the interest of Italian individuals and institutions for the Balkans increased in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On his travels through the Balkans, the philologist and publicist Marco Antonio Canini (1822-91) learned the local languages and collected information on local customs. The Italian geographical society established in Florence in 1867 was interested in, among other regions, the Balkans. From 1886, exploration of Montenegro and Albania by Antonio Baldacci (1867-1950), a geographer from Bologna, had an impact on some segments of Italian public opinion. In fact, the 1880s were a turning point in the relations between Italy and the Balkans. Reflecting the new orientation of the Italian foreign policy, naval, economic, and cultural interest in the Balkans increased. The country developed a dynamic cultural policy toward the Balkans, with Albania, under Ottoman rule, serving as its foothold. New Italian schools were opened in Scutari, Durazzo, and Valona, and Italy started to compete culturally and economically with Austria-Hungary and France in that part of the Ottoman Empire. In

other parts of the Balkans, especially in independent Romania and Serbia, Italy increased its diplomatic presence in the commercial regard. The other turning point was the Italian entry into the Great War in 1915 on the side of the Entente. Italy did not enter the war by “gearing” (*l’engrenage*) but by assessing its own interests and changing sides in European alliances. The Italian experience of the World War I in the Balkans was huge: Italy held its military positions in Albania, participated in the Allied naval operation to rescue the Serbian army from the Adriatic coast, and fought from 1916 at the Salonika front together with the French, British, Serbian, and Greek forces. What seems to be missing in the volume is a discussion of the support in Italy to Serbian refugees provided by Comitato di soccorso per i profughi serbi under the presidency of doctor Angelo Signorelli (1876-1952), as well as the Italian experience of the Salonika front described in the testimonies and memoirs of journalists and officers such as Arnaldo Fraccarolli, Aldo Carpi, and Luigi Villari.[1]

Attention is given, with good reason, to the disproportionality between political, economic, and cultural Italo-Balkan relations in the interwar period. Although Italy’s political relations with different Balkan states during the fascist period were unstable and generally conflicted, economic relations until 1937 and the sanctions of the League of Nations, in response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, seemed to be on the rise. Italian cultural penetration all over the Balkans was a more advanced process. The Italian language was the most important vector of the Italian cultural action in the Balkans, together with the press, newsreels, documentary films, and conferences of Italian scholars. The spread of Italian culture was supported by Italian cultural institutes opened all over the Balkans, which organized language courses and supported departments of the Italian language and literature at universities in Balkan countries. Moreover, Italo-Slavic studies developed through the activity of Enrico Damiani

and Giovanni Maver, both from the generation born in the early 1890s.

Conflicting desires, goals, agendas and actions of different actors during the Second World War are dealt with through a critical approach. Taking into account the legacy of the past as well as the context of the historical moment, the authors minutely discuss the policy of forced Italianization, collective punishments, mass executions and violence of the fascist occupying forces in the Balkans, as well as the communist reaction, revolutionary terror, *foibe* massacres, ethnic cleansing and expulsion of Italians from communist Yugoslavia, the problem of refugees (*esuli*), confiscation of their private property, the different perceptions of these events by Italians from different social groups and backgrounds, and the historiographic debate on that frustrating period.

This learned and sophisticated volume of historical synthesis and thought can be appreciated by specialists on the Brodelian trail but also by the broader public as indispensable reading for anyone interested in authors ranging from Predrag Matvejević to Claudio Magris.

Note

[1]. Arnaldo Fraccarolli, *Dalla Serbia invasa alle trincee di Salonicco* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1916); Aldo Carpi, *Serbia eroica* (Milan: Alfieri e Lacroix, 1917); and Luigi Villari, *La Campagna di Macedonia* (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1922).

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