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Review of Clayer and Bougarel, Europes Balkan Muslims A New History

Edin Hajdarpasic, Loyola University Chicago

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In their introduction, Bougarel and Clayer emphasize the diversity of Balkan Muslim populations and define the focus of their study as presenting “both a political and religious history of Muslims in southeast Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” This framing enables Bougarel and Clayer to trace major political developments across Balkan Muslim societies from the end of Ottoman rule and the rise of new Balkan nation-states (chapters 1 and 2) through the twentieth-century upheavals that brought new fascist, socialist, and post-socialist regimes to the region (chapters 3, 4, and 5). Faced with so many ruptures in these histories—from the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the fall of Communism—Bougarel and Clayer choose to follow the contours of state-making and explore how they affected Muslim organizations in the Balkans (consequently, the illustrations consist only of political maps that show border changes). The resulting narrative thus shows how after the disintegration of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, Balkan Muslims began to adapt to new national states and create new political parties and religious institutions. Ultimately, these “closer links between Islam and the national identities of the Balkan Muslims benefited the Islamic institutions, [but] they also led to a ‘nationalization’ of Islam” (201).

In describing this evolution, Bougarel and Clayer rely on a number of new findings, incorporating their own extensive research in the region as well as the works of other colleagues. Building on Clayer’s innovative work, for example, the book shows how in the interwar period new transnational Islamic networks sparked projects, commentaries, and ideas that connected some Balkan Muslims with intellectual currents in Lahore, Berlin, and Cairo. Clayer and Bougarel discuss a range of Islamic institutions, from clerical bodies to mystical orders to various schools, and point out changing religious practices and appropriations of symbolic sites, especially in Albania, Bosnia, and Macedonia. Moreover, the book occasionally weaves in debates about the impact of political changes on Muslim women, especially in the first half of the book where some consideration is given to women’s education and veiling. Such contributions open up important issues that are briefly raised before the mostly political narrative resumes.

Indeed, the bulk of the book consists of political history that revolves around official state policies, formal religious institutions, and political parties (with ever more party acronyms and functionary names dominating the focus as the narrative enters the twentieth century). This narrow understanding of politics stems in large part from the kind of research questions that privilege “identity” above other units of analysis. As the authors begin to establish their framework, they ask questions like “If these Muslims did not speak Turkish, who were they?” (36), or “Did they [Balkan Muslims] build specific collective identities for themselves?” (40). Thus while some of its particular findings are new, it seems that the book’s basic methodological questions have not substantially evolved since the 1990s when questions like Who are the Macedonians? or topics like Muslim Identity and the Balkan State shaped research agendas (to cite two book titles from that era).
that I could bring human agency back into the picture, because this was at the time in the 1980s when Braudel-style social history seemed dominant and human agency seemed to be going by the boards entirely. So in some ways I was a very conservative historian.

However, I very clearly pointed out in the Kaunitz book that while he was probably a very conservative historian.

The Kaunitz book raised these "identities" (or "identities") as a sweeping catch-all category for different phenomena that could be more productively disaggregated and approached through alternative idioms (such as commonality, connectedness, groupness, or categorization). Even without entirely accepting Brubaker's arguments, one can see how simple analytical shifts—like trying to describe a given dynamic without recourse to presumed "identities"—could prove useful in reconsidering, for example, the debates over secularization and Islam in Southeast Europe, or the various appeals to pan-Islamist ideas from the early to the late twentieth century. The book raises these topics and has interesting things to say about them, but it remains unclear what is their relation to Balkan Muslim "identities," what exactly those "identities" are, and crucially, why "identities" should remain the focus of the overarching framework.

The book's aim of providing "a new history" (as its subtitle puts it) is thus met with mixed success. It is partly fulfilled by the wide scope of Clayer's and Bougarel's research on a number of Balkan Muslim subjects, but the reliance on vague identity claims hinders the potential of the analysis to go beyond older ideas. At a time when Muslims and Islam are in the news from Austria to France and the United States, our ability to better understand the ongoing debates partly rests on our ability to conceptualize and reaccess the diverse histories that helped shape our current moment.

Edin Hajdarpasic
Loyola University Chicago

Salzburg Festival from page 19

Aeschylus, we witness how hubris and presumption lead people to their downfall.

At first glance, Die Zauberflöte (directed by Lydia Steier) may seem odd in this context—but only at first glance. In fact, Mozart's opera works like a microscope in conjunction with all these pieces. Or is it, perhaps, a universal, enlightened, playful discourse on all these subjects, as only Mozart's music could offer during the age of Enlightenment?

The festival runs from July 20-August 30. As usual, our critic Barbara Lawarts Melton will report in the fall 2018 ASN.

This article was adapted from the preface of the Directorat of the Salzburg Festival (Helge Rahl-Stadler, President; Markus Hinterhäuser, Artistic Director) and the festival's program.