

BRUKENTHALIA

Romanian Cultural History Review

Supplement of *Brukenthal. Acta Musei*

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Revistă Română de Istorie Culturală Supliment al revistei *Brukenthal. Acta Musei*

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No.2



MUZEUL
NAȚIONAL
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EDITURA MUZEULUI NAȚIONAL BRUKENTHAL

Sibiu/Hermannstadt 2012

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ISSN 2285 - 9497

ISSN-L 2285 - 9489

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The Ottoman Heritage in the Balkans¹

Adriana CUPCEA²

Abstract. The Ottoman Empire, along with the Roman and Byzantine Empires was one of the most powerful and longest imperial systems in history. During its existence, from the 13th Century until 1923 it comprised territories in the Middle East, North Africa and South East Europe and the Balkans.

Our study will focus on the Ottoman period in the latter mentioned region, the Balkans or the South Eastern Europe. More specifically, it will explore various hypotheses about the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans, will identify the behaviours and the perceptions that shape this heritage among the peoples in this region. The research perspectives are multiple: historical, political, cultural, socio-economic and demographic, all contributing to the understanding of the Ottoman history, while ensuring the necessary perspectives on the post-Ottoman present.

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire, the Balkans, heritage, perceptions, myths*

Rezumat. Imperiul Otoman a reprezentat alături de Imperiul Roman și cel Bizantin unul dintre sistemele imperiale cele mai puternice și mai longevive din istoria universală. Pe parcursul existenței sale, din secolul al XIII-lea și până în 1923 a cuprins teritorii din Orientul Mijlociu, Africa de Nord și Sud Estul Europei sau Balcani.

Studiul se va concentra asupra perioadei otomane în această ultimă regiune menționată, Balcanii sau Europa de Sud-Est. Mai exact, va explora diferitele ipoteze asupra moștenirii otomane în Balcani, va identifica comportamentele și percepțiile pe care această moștenire le modelează în rândul popoarelor din această regiune. Perspectivile de abordare sunt multiple: istorică, politică, culturală, socio-economică și demografică, toate contribuind la înțelegerea trecutului otoman și asigurând în același timp perspectivele necesare asupra prezentului post-otoman.

Cuvinte cheie: *Imperiul Otoman, Balcani, moștenire, percepții, mituri*

*

The Balkans' designation

According to the Palgrave dictionary, The Balkan Peninsula or The Balkans, also called South-Eastern Europe, stretches from the South of Europe until the Eastern Mediterranean, bordered to the West by the Adriatic, to the East by the Black and Aegean Seas. Its northern limit is shared by the Carpathians to the East and North-East and the Julian Alps to the extreme North-West. On a stretch of nearly 500 kilometres, the rivers Danube, Sava and Drava divide the two mountain chains in the North-West, and on 125 kilometres to the East the Plains of the Danube and Prut separate the Carpathians from the Black Sea. Thus these main rivers have been established as natural limit. (Hupchick, Cox 2001, 1, **Fig.1**) The same work

includes in the Balkans, due to the current political situation the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro. (Hupchick, Cox 2001, 2) The versatility of the region, as well as the diversity of opinions about its content are noticeable, in the present time some authors exclude sometimes Greece, Croatia or Romania from the Balkans.

Concerning the term definition of the Balkans, this is strictly related to the perception of Western Europe on the region. The term began to spread in the 19th century, after being used in 1809 by the German geographer August Zeune, as the expression *Balkanhalbinsel*, again to be used only in the title of a British travel journal of 1831. (Stoianovich 1994, 1) This term has rapidly became notorious because of the need for a decent toponym for references to this region, belonging to the Ottoman Empire, and in the second half of the 19th century to the emergent states. The Turks however, called the region Rumelia, this toponym being widely discussed in Ebru Boyar's paper, *The Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans*, to which I will refer again later. In the 18th century, the West also

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² "This work was possible with through financial support of the Sectoral Operational Program for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU 89/1.5/S/60189 with the title "Postdoctoral Programs for Sustainable Development in a Knowledge Based Society."

called this region European Turkey, thus acknowledging its belonging to the Ottoman Empire since the 14th century.

In the manner in which its limits altered over time, so has the whole region oscillated between West and East. Currently the Balkans is considered as belonging to the West, as in Europe, while in the past they were perceived in the Orient/East. The Eastern and South-Eastern territories of Europe were the first *Orients* of Western Europe and the Westerns' attitude towards this space in the 17th and 18th centuries constituted the pattern of their final perception on the non-Western lands. (Fleming 2000, 1230)

One of the most complex theories in this matter belongs to Maria Todorova. In 1996, explaining the way in which the Balkans acquired the conflictual and instability reputation in the West, she argues that the Balkans is currently a synonym to the South-Eastern Europe, gathering several states: Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, part of Turkey and all of the former Yugoslavia. This however excludes the fact that many of these countries are claiming the contrary. Etymologically, the word Balkans – *Balkanlar* is Turkish, meaning *mountain*. It was a neutral term, not pejoratively used until the end of the 19th century, when the above-mentioned states began to emerge from the Ottoman Empire as independent. The conclusion of Maria Todorova is that the Balkans is built not as an alterity but as an incomplete self, that uncivilized or savage part of Europe. (Todorova 2009, 58) She then discusses also the historical definition, thus concluding that the Balkans is equivalent to its Ottoman heritage. (Todorova 2009, 12)

Ebru Boyar imputes the omission of the Turkish-Ottoman perspective considering the interpretation from an exterior point, that of translating and adapting the term. Referring to the term of *Balkanlar*, she argues that in Turkish the term's connotation varied in times thus its interpretation must not be final. (Boyar 2007, 29-32) She compares the term Balkans to Rumeli, considering the first as the European perception of the region and the second the Ottoman one. Precisely, Rumeli was equivalent to the European territories under the authority of the Ottoman Empire, including in its contraction period of the 19th century, thus reflecting the term's wide variations in sense. At the same time, the Balkans regard the same territories and during the second half of the 19th century remains unaltered even with the emergence of new states. Although it was not defined in the European perception in the mentality of the Ottoman intellectuals, it became part of the political thesaurus in the last decades of the Empire. The Turkish Republic of 1923 inherited both the

Balkans concept as well as its fluidity in the Late Ottoman Era. Moreover, in the 30's the term Balkans became part of the Turkish geographic thesaurus, even if, both in the European and Ottoman-Turkish perception the term bears a more political than geographical sense. Boyar closes by saying that this region's limits were drawn not according to latitude and longitude, but to frontiers and political alliances. (Boyar 2007, 41)

The ottoman heritage in the Balkans

The 500 year Ottoman occupation thus named the peninsula, this being the longest time of political unity in the region. Maria Todorova states that South-Eastern Europe not only received a new cognomen in this time, but also the Ottoman or believed as Ottoman elements gave birth to the current stereotype of the Balkans.

The historiography of the matter presents two opposite interpretations. The first perceives the Ottoman period as a religious, political and social, foreign intrusion in the native societies of the Balkans. In this approach, the occurrence of the Ottoman image as foreign subjugation is identified or, in the specific areal languages, the *Ottoman Yoke*. (Todorova 2004, 164)

The second is the one looking upon the Ottoman period as a symbiosis between the Turkish, Muslim tradition and the Byzantine/Balkan one, and argues that the centuries of coexistence produced a common heritage, thus the history of the Ottoman Empire being the history of all its peoples. The first interpretation is preferred and more according to the Balkan nationalisms, even in the scientific and intellectual circles, as well as in the general population of the Balkan states.

The matter of the Ottoman heritage may also be divided. The objective, exterior perspective is placed chronologically in the Ottoman Empire, looking upon the linear historical time, from the past towards the present. According to it, the Ottoman heritage is only the gathered remains of the time of Ottoman subjugation of the region. (Todorova 2004, 164)

Another interpretation on this matter is the subjective, interior one, chronologically placed in the present, representing in fact the retrospective evaluation of the Ottoman heritage from this point of view, a process beginning after the fall of the Empire and the emergence of Balkan states, and gathering all the features inherited from the historical situation of the 18th and 19th centuries. (Todorova 2009, 12)

Following an account of the papers discussing the Ottoman heritage, as a political, cultural, social and economic continuity, Todorova

established that in all these subjects, except the demography and folklore, the break occurred immediately after the independence of the Balkan states and was completed at the end of WWI. The author identifies a limited **political heritage**, due to the rejection of the Ottoman political tradition that meant the emergence of the Balkan states. (Todorova 2009, 12)

She insists in this perspective on the fact that the Ottomans never created nor tolerated political or cultural Balkan elites. Except for the institution of the Patriarch and the Phanariotes, the Christian elites weren't integrated in the Empire build around its Muslim identity (most of the Muslims in the Balkans were allied to the Ottoman Empire, although the fact that so many Muslims remained in the Balkans reveal that local loyalties were stronger than imperial attachment; this is the case of the Muslim Bosnians, which were the social elite of their region, and of other such groups in the empire; they didn't develop a national ideology based on the belonging to an own, separate state) (Todorova 1996, 58). This is valid not only for the political sphere, but also for that of **high culture** and lead to the erection of two barriers, religious and cultural, that eventually facilitated the break from the Ottoman culture. Precisely, we can speak of a limited penetration of Ottoman culture from Istanbul towards the Balkans, because of its production by a Muslim Turks, Arab or Persian cultural elite, concentrated in the Capital and less numerous in the Balkans. (Todorova 1996, 58) Rupture in this domain came also because the opinion makers especially in the 19th century began to enhance their Europeanism and Christianity. In the field of folklore these efforts were slimmer, a degree of Ottoman heritage being traceable especially in the cuisine and music, also in urban architecture.

Regarding the **social** and **economic** aspects, few common features of all the Balkan states are traceable back to the Ottoman times: the absence of the land-owner nobility due to the state's necessity to control the resources, converted into the impeachment of the coagulation tendency of a land-owner class, which has the ability of evolving separately from the state. (Todorova 2009, 173)

The most important part of the heritage can be detected in the **demographical** field. It can be historically argued that the Ottoman period meant massive population movements, extended until after WWI, concluded into an overlap, a religious, linguistic and ethnic blend. (Todorova 2009, 174) Although the Ottomans never Islamized by force the Christian population, they encouraged the settlement of Turkish, Muslim populations in the newly conquered territories in the Balkans.

(Küçükcan 1999, 50) However, conversions to Islam occurred, for the obvious disadvantages that the non-Muslim population was suffering. Currently, there are considerable Muslim populations in the Balkans, thus the Turkish-Islamic elements of the Ottoman heritage remaining a permanent entity in the Balkans. (Küçükcan 1999, 64) The most numerous are settled today in Greece and Bulgaria. The estimated figures of the Turkish population in Bulgaria vary between 600,000 (Warhola, Boteva 2003, 256) and 800,000 (Petkova 2002, 57) from which approximately 100,000 Pomaks, Muslim Bulgarians, whose ancestors were converted in the 17th century. (Stavrianos 2000, 10) In Greece there is a Muslim community of over 130,000-150,000 people. (Meinardus 2002, 85) Another one, of more than 1 Million people lives in the former Yugoslavia, most of it in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Romania, the Turkish and Tartar presence, especially in the region of Dobrudja, dates from the 13th century (Gemil 2010), consolidated all throughout the Ottoman period, counting in the present time around 32,000 Turks and 24,000 Tartars. (*Centre of Resurces for Ethnocultural Diversity* - Centrul de Resurse pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală)

The conclusion of Todorova is that in fact only the ethnic and religious diversity can be considered as traces of a common continuous heritage, in the other fields, except folklore, all can be considered only as perceived heritage. Precisely, the perceived Ottoman heritage is built around the speech of Balkanic nationalisms, as this is a solid base for these states with many similarities. For the better understanding of the concept, the author argues that the Balkan states which were part of the Ottoman Empire were continuously distancing themselves, in their efforts for European integration, from their Ottoman heritage, therefore promoting an eradication of these last traces, of coexistence and multi-ethnicity, by replacing them with homogenous ethnic groups. (Todorova 2004, 13) She induces the idea that a denial of the Ottoman heritage from the part of the states of the region is also a denial of the historical heritage of the Balkans, in a superficial attempt to demonstrate their belonging to the European culture.

Another approach of the Ottoman heritage problem is that of its perception from the perspective of the myth of the 500 years of tyranny and oppression in the Balkans, which is considered a part of the nationalist folklore of the region. (Stavrianos 200, 114) In the historiography of the matter it is argued that the Ottoman regime never had any destructive character in the Balkans, at least until the moment of decline, even though it is frequently assigned. This period is not described as

a peaceful one, any massacres or pillages being mentioned, but also the change in the life conditions of the peoples in the Balkans, after the moment of conquest has ended. (Mantran 2001, 253)

Among the positive aspects highlighted are the internal autonomy given to some communities in exchange for any tributes or taxes, the permissive attitude towards the Orthodox Patriarch's influence in the peninsula, together with the lack of any assimilation or religious proselytism policies of the Ottoman authorities. (Stavrianos 2000, 114) In spite of the previous efficiency, in the decline period the Balkan peoples were subdued to the raptures of the government officials and to the violence of the military, thus nationalisms being induced.

An important aspect presented by Stavrianos is the association of the myth of the Ottoman yoke to that of the backwardness of the Balkan peoples. The author connects this to the theocratic, static and self-sufficient organization of the Balkan societies, to the monopoly of the Orthodox Church over intellectual life, together with the illiteracy and lack of culture access of the population. (Stavrianos 2000, 112) He thinks that the Orthodox theocracy has enhanced this underdevelopment, to the incapacity of the Balkan societies to evolve, thus that this was not induced by the Ottoman rule, but the inertia, the ignorance to which the Orthodox Church contributed were the stagnating factors, making thus impossible any reaction of the population to the Ottoman rule or this theocracy.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire and its effect on the Balkan peoples

For most of the Empire's subjects local loyalties prevailed, as the belonging to local communities. Even if a larger identity were to exist, that was a religious one, rather than a political one. Thus, the Ottoman Empire was not a cohesive institution, did not order the active loyalty and submission of the peoples on its territory, but was rather a conglomerate of distant groups, self-centred and self-sufficient. The absence of an Ottoman nationalism left an ideological gap, filled with Balkan, Arab, even Turkish nationalisms and WWI acted as a detonator for these feelings and demolished the Ottoman imperial structure.

During its decline, the Empire began to lose control over the frontier regions, some conquered by the neighbouring powers. Between the Suleiman's the Magnificent reign and the 19th century, the Empire lost Hungary, Transylvania, Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia and the Banat to the Habsburgs, the Northern shore of the Black Sea to the Russians and the Danube Principalities became autonomous. (Stavrianos 2000, 138)

Besides the alteration of the frontiers, the military and administrative damage, the occurrence of the *chiflik* system lead to unrest and peasant revolts, the enhancements of commerce and industry, inducing new people with new ideas, as well as the increase in contacts with Europe, lead to the influence of foreign ideologies. The expansion of the European powers in the region was also an important element. All throughout the 19th century, when nationalist movements began to occur, these factors influenced its evolution. However, Balkan nationalism was not a homogenous or coherent one, but degenerated in a series of separate revolts, independent all throughout the 19th century. (Stavrianos 2000, 222) The Balkan nationalisms have altered the political state of the region so, that if at the beginning of the 19th century all of it was under Ottoman rule, by 1878 three independent states and an autonomous one occurred. (Stavrianos 2000, 115) These evolutions, known in the historiography as the Oriental Question, culminated with the beginning of WWI, which altered definitively the geopolitical scene of the Balkan Peninsula. Most of the new frontiers were established by force then confirmed by the peace treaties of Paris. The treaty of Sèvres, with Turkey, was the only one that could not be enforced. Following the triumph of the national revolt of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in July 1923, the treaty of Lausanne is signed, which cancelled all the articles of Sèvres. The new treaty acknowledged all the conquests of the Kemalist Turkey, all of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace, insuring the international recognition of the sovereignty of the new Turkish Republic, proclaimed the successor state of the Ottoman Empire.

An important aspect of the treaty of Lausanne was the separate deal signed by Greece and Turkey, concerning the mutual exchange of minorities. In 1923 more than one Million Orthodox Greeks, former citizens of the Ottoman Empire were transferred to Greece from Asia, while approximately 400,000 Turks left Greece for Turkey. An exception has been made for the Turks in Western Thrace, which were still 30% of the population, (Stavrianos 2000, 591) on condition that the same privileges were to be granted to the extended Greek community of Constantinople. This stage is important not only because it marked the end of the Ottoman world (Mazower 2000, 107), but also because it altered substantially the ethnic map of the Balkans, especially in the territories inhabited by Greeks. (Jelavich 1977, 316) Most of the Asian Greeks were established in the Balkans, radically changing their ethnic character. Thus, in 1923, 89% of the population of Macedonia was Greek, from the 43% in 1912. (Mazower 2000, 107)

In the interwar period, although the frontiers were altered according to the self-determination principle, this produced in some cases rather large ethnic minorities in the new states, thus also ethnic tensions. To these, political and infrastructure matters contributed, like the agrarian economy of the Balkan peoples in which the land ownership was thoroughly fragmented, poverty, overpopulating, illiteracy, corruption, radical governments, lack of minority policies and investment capital. WWII, even by preserving the national frontiers, meant a social revolution for the Balkans, with a major influence on internal structures. The monarchies were abolished, traditional political parties repressed together with influent political leaders, to leave the scene for the new communist regime, which seized the Northern Balkans for half a century, subordinating all the social activities to the interests of the official ideology. (Stavrianos 2000, 839) Describing in 1958 the level and manner in which the societies were subdued to the communist regime, Stavrianos argued that no matter how long these regimes were to last, they will leave their print in the Balkans deeper than the Ottoman Empire. He stated this from the perspective of the traditional problem of the development gap between the Balkan and Western societies. In this context, two development models occurred in the 20th century: the Communist Northern Balkans and the Western democratic Greece left as the single outpost of the free world after WWII. Stavrianos concludes his work, *The Balkans since 1453*, by inquiring which of the two models will be more successful in adapting and overlapping the traditional matter of the underdevelopment of the Balkans (Stavrianos 2000, 844).

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d. Internet sources:

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Centrul de Resurse pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală [The Center of Resources for Ethnocultural Diversity], *Baza de date-Structura Etno-demografică a României*



Fig.1 Political Map of the Balkans (Hupchick, 2001)