
BOOK REVIEWS

MARIE-JANINE CALIC

Geschichte des Balkans:

Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart

(History of the Balkans: From the beginnings to the present day)

Munich: C.H. Beck, 2023

THE 2023 German-language book *Geschichte des Balkans: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (History of the Balkans: From the beginnings to the present day) is part of the C.H. Beck “Wissen” (Knowledge) shortform series, which provides compact and accessible scholarly overviews on a variety of historical, cultural, and sociopolitical topics. The author of the reviewed volume, Marie-Janine Calic, is an expert on southeastern European history at the renowned Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich, where she holds a full professorship.

The present work runs to a total of 128 pages divided into nine short chapters, accompanied by three maps as well as lists of bibliographical references and historical personages. Adopting a largely chronological and generalist perspective, it opens with a brief introductory chapter (pp. 7–8) which outlines the volume’s purview, while the second chapter (pp. 8–21) briefly presents and defines the notion of the Balkans over time, detailing the varying interrelations and usages of the terms “Balkan,” “Southeastern Europe,” and the “Western Balkans” with regard to the changing geopolitical analysis and the role of the region within the multidisciplinary

academic domain of Area Studies. Mindful of the book’s potential readership, this chapter also contains a section on the research on Eastern and Southeastern European history in the German-speaking world from the 19th century up to the present day.

The focus of Chapter 3 (pp. 21–32), however, is on the Balkans during antiquity, offering a brief portrait of the peninsula under Ancient Greek and particularly Roman rule. It then briefly outlines the background and consequences of the division of the Roman Empire and the manifold changes that ensued, with a section also focusing on the large migrations caused by the instability, including the arrival of the Slavs in the region. Looking at the period from the seventh to the mid-fifteenth centuries, Chapter 4 (pp. 33–49) not only examines everyday life during the Byzantine period but also observes the increasing Christianization of the peninsula. It also gives an overview of initial attempts to formalize power structures through the creation of early kingdoms and similar entities, as well as the presence of outside forces and various uprisings which characterized the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Chapter 5 (pp. 50–66) charts the fate of the Balkans under external rule from the mid-fifteenth century up until the end of the 18th century, when it was largely divided between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. This primarily involves presenting and analyzing the rise and military activities of the Ottoman Empire af-

ter the 1453 conquest of Constantinople, as well as the subsequent role of Islam in Europe and everyday life for Ottoman subjects from administrative, economic, and societal perspectives. With the influential intellectual and ideological currents of the 18th and 19th centuries also sweeping the Balkans, Chapter 6 (pp. 66–82) delves into the groundswell of nationalism in the region up until the First Balkan War, noting the independence of Greece and Serbia from Ottoman rule in the first decades of the 1800s; the Crimean War (1854–1856) and the Great Eastern Crisis in the 1870s; the rise of the “Young Turks” movement in the Ottoman lands; and the international crisis caused by Austria-Hungary’s formal annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908.

Chapter 7 (pp. 82–100) covers the two Balkan Wars as well as the two World Wars, describing the build-up and aftermath of the 1914 Sarajevo assassinations and the ensuing global conflict, as well as the region’s fate at the Paris Peace Conference. It also highlights the ideological changes that the new countries of the peninsula underwent in the years preceding 1939, before charting the fate of the various countries during World War Two, including the impact of Nazi occupation and the Holocaust. Focusing on the postwar era, the eighth chapter (pp. 100–115) looks at the tumult which accompanied the end of World War Two and the ideological changes in the region, which largely shifted towards communism, noting particularly the Yugoslav case following Tito’s break with the Soviet Union after 1948. The region’s geopolitical significance during the Cold War is highlighted, as well as some of the problematic economic issues which arose during late Communist times.

The ninth and final chapter (pp. 116–124) zooms in on the region from 1989 to the present day, giving first an overview of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the wars that ensued, and the subsequent peace negotiations. It then offers insights into Southeastern Europe’s wider political and economic integration in recent years, noting the expansion of NATO and the European Union into the Balkans, as well as outlining potential future developments for the peninsula.

In summary, this is an ambitious book which manages to compress key points relating to the varied history of the Balkans into just over a hundred pages, an impressive feat considering the complexities of the region’s ethnolinguistic, ethnocultural, and religious diversity. For the curious German-speaking reader, this study therefore gives an excellent synoptic overview of the historical context behind this richly rewarding region. Accordingly, *Geschichte des Balkans* is recommended for scholars from various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences who wish to gain a general understanding of the historical forces that—in many cases—still profoundly influence the present-day politics, societies, languages, and cultures of the Balkan peninsula.



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