
This is a geographer’s book, whose primary aim is to ‘release geography from national frameworks and to address borders as ordinary objects’ (5). While remaining a specialist text, it also appears to be aimed at a wider audience of social scientists. Inevitably, it constantly runs the risk of falling between the two stools of these two aims. Occasionally the book seems to drift into a travelogue. That said, the book provides a wealth of interesting material for any scholar interested in the Balkans. Challenging the idea that ‘maps are only cultural products or social constructions’ (8), Darques stresses throughout his book the solidly material aspect of geographical investigation, and the perspectives offered by new tools, starting with Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

The first part of the book is essentially introductory, describing the methodological assumptions of the book (‘Field Approach’) and providing a descriptive “Four Seasons” Approach to the Balkan Borderlands’ based on the author’s trips in the postcommunist era. This is followed by a brief historical overview (‘From Empires to Nations, 1800-2015’), which includes a description of a series of ‘Micro-territorial Disputes’, involving Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia.

Darques illustrates his ‘structural approach to geography’ (56) and the various issues in the practice of mapping, including the security concerns that—at least until the end of the Cold War—have distorted this mapping. The author seems to assume a universal and unquestionable effectiveness of satellite mapping. It might have been useful to point out cases in which security concerns (if not simple privacy laws) can still create obstacles to satellite mapping and to the seemingly ubiquitous Google Earth system.

The historical overview is perhaps the aspect that may prove less satisfactory, at least for practicing historians. The process of Ottoman fragmentation (which some scholars have considered an Ottoman Civil War)—as opposed to the more familiar notion of Balkan ‘nation-building’—does not receive much attention. A clearer distinction between the process of state consolidation and that of border consolidation would have been useful. As it happens, the state systems established in 1878 proved to be more resilient than those created in 1919-1923. This has little to do with borders as such, but rather with the ability of Balkan states to consolidate from 1878 to 1940, as opposed to illusory post-World War One ‘Wilsonian moment’, which ended abruptly in 1992.

Darques rightly devotes much attention to the implications of communist rule in the (under)development of communication networks at the ‘crossroads’ of the Balkans. He might have also usefully offered a comparative view of the situation in East Central Europe (i.e. the
northern tier of Eastern Europe), which is quite different; or, even more, to the situation in the territories of the former Soviet Union. More generally, the role of institutional actors (their ‘agency’) could also have been mentioned: the neglect of the railway system in Republican Turkey (and afterwards in many postcommunist countries), for example, not least reflects also the injunctions of the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions.

In the second part of the book, the geographer can express more fully the characteristics of his craft. Darques argues that an attentive analysis of ‘Border Sedimentation’, especially along the borders of the southern part of the Balkans, can explain historical developments. In a similar manner, ‘frontier issues’ can be analysed, explaining security concerns: the author seems genuinely puzzled by the fact that inter-state relations did not ease in the postcommunist era. Remote Sensory tools, as opposed to classical cartography, are a further device to enhance geographies.

The final section of this part of the book is devoted to an in-depth analysis of ‘Eastern Macedonia’ (the Rhodope region) along the Greek-Bulgarian border. This is achieved through Scale Level Mapping as well as a series of thematic mappings of the historical demography of the region measuring administrative variation, such as the ethnographic, demographic and socio-economic picture. In short, Darques provides a convincing illustration of the way in which historical and geographic sources can be integrated, achieving a previously inaccessible level of precision.

In his conclusion, Darques argues that the Cold War ‘world of complete information blackout now belongs to the past. GIS data repositories are built today to give details on whatever place of the globe, with an excellent degree of precision […]. The present work aimed at filling the gaps while restoring in some way the tarnished reputation of the Balkan area’ (297-98). Historically speaking, he later adds, ‘the border obsession of all modern nation-states expresses a raging desire to uphold Western standards of territoriality. The balkanization process is nothing like the bloody reminiscence of eastern instincts’ (303). Ultimately, Darques’ argument is that ‘geography still matters’ (309).

Few would disagree with such views. Darques has provided a vivid illustration of the relevance of geography, in the literal sense of the word: his book is replenished with an extraordinary number of illustrations, photographs and maps (both historical and newly created by the author), all with an excellent quality of reproduction. No historian could even dream of coming across a history book with such visual richness. Leaving aside the aesthetic aspect, this is a book that should be in the bag of any self-respecting archival (or micro-historical) researcher of the Balkans.

Two basic caveats need to be made. The first is the extent to which the book remains a product for geographers; scholars in other social science fields are unlikely to be able to fully appreciate its implications. The second is the relative absence of a comparative perspective. All too many topics (e.g. territorial enclaves) are analysed without mentioning any possible term of comparison. It seems strange to read a book by a French scholar who never mentions electoral geography, which could have been fruitfully applied to the Balkan regions, at least for some periods. Some conclusions that may well be in-
novative in geography will sound familiar to historians, sociologists or social anthropologists. But this remains, in any case, a truly worthwhile work.

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Editors and authors Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić, in their two-volume work Revolutionary Totalitarianism, Pragmatic Socialism, Transition and Titoism, Self-Determination, Nationalism, Cultural Memory offer a fundamentally different reading of the history of Yugoslavia from 1945 to 1990, and more importantly for the purpose of this review, they shed new light on its disintegration and the conflicts that followed in the 1990s. The junction of ethnocentrism and politics has remained in effect to this day, taking the greatest toll on citizens while political elites have been failing to contrive feasible ways to achieve social and economic security. Rather, they have continued to resort to national rhetoric as a seemingly safe haven for all political temptations. The texts under scrutiny here break away from the common knowledge of Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav period by focusing on the social and cultural specificities existing in the area that made up the former Yugoslavia and the question of how these specificities were moulded into what followed.

In the early 1990s, awareness of the significance of former Yugoslavia was lost. Among the intellectual elites, every controversy ended with conclusions about national vulnerability and a subsequent inevitability of self-defence. There was no capacity left to objectively assess the transformative results of the social and economic development in Yugoslavia. Certain social issues were transformed into national issues, which then acquired a mythical quality. In Serbia, for example, many intellectuals of that time, most notably the writer Dobrica Ćosić, began to judge Tito’s ruling negatively and to directly oppose the idea of Yugoslavism to the national awareness of Serbs, wherever they lived. However, the demand for de-Titoisation and national self-determination was not present only among Serbs. First Slovenia and then Croatia declared independence in 1991, thereby turning the process of the disintegration of Yugoslavia into a fact. By the same principle, the Serbs in Croatia proclaimed independence from the newly established Croatian state, which led to repercussions and overall instability. After the wars, the emerging states developed relying on nationalities. Soon their weakness became evident and social antagonisms began to deepen. Uncompromising political attitudes, perpetuating economic insecurity and the constant threat of renewed conflict made ordinary citizens reconsider the Yugoslav past.

After setting this scene, the authors analyse topics such as the fashion industry, partisan film and multiculturalism in former Yugoslavia, to name only few. In turning to the present, the authors focus on quests for the remembrance of former