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Isa Blumi,

Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800-1912

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 272 p.

Isa Blumi's work, *Reinstating the Ottomans*, joins other revisionist scholarship that seeks to reinterpret Balkan histories by reexamining events and individuals with new perspectives and methodological tools of analysis that attempt to move away from viewing the region within parochial ethno-national frameworks. He initiates this task by first positing, and then demonstrating with felicitous detail, that prior to Second Constitutional Era of the Ottomans, populations in the region had no firm ethno-national consciousness, which ultimately undermines the primordial and teleological assumptions of Balkan nationalism that have dominated much of post Ottoman and present sociological scholarship on the region. These points are validated through the author's meticulous reading of sources and images that encapsulate the striking heterogeneity and interaction and collaboration of different individuals in the Western Balkans which surprisingly superseded purported ethnic and religious loyalties. *Reinstating the Ottomans* posits that there were a plethora of complex factors and conditions that ultimately contributed and resulted in the inexorable rise of nation states after WWI, and it is within this context that the author contradicts "western" concepts of modernity by highlighting individual experiences, regionalisms, and subaltern actions demonstrating "alternative modernities".

Nationalist histories of the Balkans have erased much of their Ottoman past in favor of effortlessly linking their modern identities to the pre-Ottoman medieval period. Throughout the first chapter, the reliance and verity of this medieval linkage is convincingly refuted when highlighting the nuances of identity and authorities from the 1300s onwards. Documents produced by these ancient polities are utilized by many historians to claim modern ethno-religious links, however, the author finds that records indicate a range of affiliations and that there was no unifying language or overarching culture which is often used to reaffirm primordial ties to the past. Interestingly, many of the nationalist heroes associated with these dynasties betray their relationship asserted with their homeland and putative ethnicities when we see that they fought alongside coalitions associated with the Ottomans during transitional power periods. The author reasons that throughout history, individuals in the Balkans found their standing in society ensuing from their social statuses, church associations, local affinities, and power authority that were sometimes constantly shifting, rather than monolithic,

fixed nationalities. According to the author, the variety of interests and hybrid associations of these individuals in the pre WWI Ottoman Balkans were unlikely to unite around an imaginary nation that many proclaim resulted in nationalist uprisings and new states.

In addition, the author also extensively discusses key actors often evoked by socialist histories of the Balkans such as Ismail Qemal, and argues that the elite of the region contending with reforms during the *Tanzimat* and the Second Constitutional Era had fluid identities and were not adamant about separating from the empire. Another example provided to support this assertion in the text includes the analysis of the Albanian nationalist writer and poet Pashko Vasa, who the author states was an important intermediary attempting to stir nationalist feelings parallel to his efforts of protecting regional borders from external threats in order to keep the heterogeneous Ottoman Balkans intact. An alternative and noteworthy case is that of Sami Frasheri, who also advocated for the strengthening the empire by calling for uniting collectively while at the same time advocating for the edification of the “uncivilized” regions of the Western Balkans, in particular the Gege which he differentiates from the Toske who were often coined cultured or westernized. This viewpoint also highlights the significant regional differences among present day Albanians, Slavs, and others which are often overlooked when examining nationalism in the Balkans from myopic perspectives that reflect essentialized visions of identity.

In contrast to most mega narratives of the region’s history, this text posits that the events and drama among the Balkan population surrounding the Berlin Congress and subsequent signing of the San Stefano treaty which ultimately resulted in the imposition of new frontiers were not driven by nationalist reaction. Again, to support this interpretation the roles of different political entrepreneurs are discussed which offers a great deal of understanding of the diverse experiences while highlighting the complexities of agency among the population that presents the reader with a sounder understanding of encounters with modernity. Furthermore, his analysis of the refugee and precarious population exchanges of the era indicates that individuals were more likely to petition the Ottoman government for help rather than adopting “nationalist” declarations in their cries and concerns. In addition, he finds that “civilization” and “backwardness” were major themes in Western Balkan discourse amongst Albanians who supported centralizing reforms and the strengthening role of education and Islam in the region.

In the last two chapters the concept of border frontiers, identity politics, and new boundaries throughout subsequent and Hamidian eras are discussed

in detail. The author suggests that the events surrounding the revolutionary movements of 1908 have been interpreted as sudden nationalist awakenings when, in fact, sources reveal a complex set of competing forces and interests rather than a common ideological or political goal influencing and uniting individuals in the region, which essentially complicates the traditional historiography of the era. Within distinguished communities in places such as Kosovo, there were oppositional factions supporting the Ottoman regime alongside those exhibiting anti-Hamidian sentiment in conjunction with the Committee of Union and Progress. Furthermore, those defiant of the Sultan and critical of his legitimacy were not calling for separation and independence but rather advocating for the restoration of the 1876 constitution, thereby indicating that rebellious reactions of the era should be repositioned within new frameworks that allow one to analyze the events through a wider lens that elucidate the nuances of individual experiences that broaden our understanding of regional affairs. Overtime, external factors influenced the positions of individuals once loyal to the Ottoman regime that eventually associated them with nationalist and patriotic dreams in the ensuing years around WWI that offered ample opportunity for independence. These conflicting allegiances are something that has been virtually ignored by historians in the region and the author convincingly argues his points surrounding these contentions.

Schools and education were a major premise of reform in the late empire that facilitated dimensions of modernization resulting from the dissemination and inculcation of particular cultural, political, and ideological ideas, though most scholars have focused on the few nationalist schools rather than taking into account the repertoire of institutions students attended. While locally run schools and cultural clubs of the era did facilitate a growing sense of Albanian identity in the region, the text suggests that the attendance at state run schools indicates a variety of other suppositions that do not need to be viewed within a nationalist context, for there were still indications of loyalty to the regime despite sociocultural and political transformations that scholars have interpreted as a growing sense of unifying national identities precursors to evolving modern states. Sources suggest that many Albanians lobbied for the construction of state schools in their local towns, therefore such establishments were not viewed as subjugating institutions per se. In addition, the foundational basis of future nationalist movements, such as reinforcing a sense of unity and development, were formed in Ottoman schools themselves which many Balkan intellectuals found more functional and effective amongst the realm of competing educational institutions. The interaction, collaboration, and relationship

between the centralizing state and Albanian elite in this chapter suggest that Balkan populations viewed the Ottoman apparatus as a means to further their own agendas and did not elucidate the oppressed/oppressors dichotomy often evoked by nationalist historians of the region.

Reinstating the Ottomans presents a narrative that examines a variety of competing motivations and shifting identities in different contexts that influenced the transformations in the Balkan region throughout the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the way in which they eventually played out for posterity. The tumultuous transformations and reforms taking place during the course of the 19th century certainly affected a myriad of factions; however, this study has demonstrated that a variety of economic, social, and even personal variables exacerbated tensions that should not be viewed as harbingers of matriculating nations in subsequent periods. Taking into account the intricate set of factors that influenced individuals of the period supports the author's critiques and arguments that put forward the shortcomings of reductionist scholarship that continue to permeate present day historical and social analysis of Southeastern Europe. When examining the way in which Albanians, Slavs, Christians, Muslims, and sects among them coexisted and collaborated throughout new circumstances, it is evident that the mantras and rhetoric revolving around the notion of "ancient hatreds" that perpetuate misconceptions and stereotypes are strongly contested and negated throughout this study.

This work contrasts from much of the current scholarship in the region in that it tends to adopt postmodern critiques and applies social science methodologies in an appropriate and systematic manner from fresh perspectives. Despite the book's approachable nature, it does require some background knowledge of the history and politics of the era and regions discussed in order to truly appreciate the author's respectable scholarship. Overall, this text makes a significant contribution to modern Balkan studies in terms of its compelling findings regarding the fluidity of national identity in the region's past, local loyalties, and state-society relations, all of which give a comprehensive and proper understanding of the area today. *Reinstating the Ottomans* is well worth the read for anyone willing to challenge traditional narratives on nationalism and identity in the region's history.

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