Reviews

Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *The Balkans: A Post-Communist History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 620 pp.

It is not easy to critique a book that covers nine countries, about a dozen different ethnicities, several civil wars, and a time period of roughly two millennia, all densely packed into 620 pages of small print. The best the conscientious reviewer can do is to offer the reader some basic insights and 'signposts' to ease the approach to this highly ambitious work. *The Balkans* is divided into eleven chapters, nine of which are devoted to individual country-studies including the 'quasi-state' of Kosovo, but excluding Slovenia and Greece due to their advanced stage of economic and political liberalization. Each chapter begins with a brief country-profile and then delivers what the authors consider the necessary *longue durée* background to post-Communist history. As the title indicates, the bulk of the text is devoted to developments in the post-Communist era. The Balkan states' painful transition to liberal capitalism, the ongoing struggle to establish a civil society and democratic institutions, the enormous impediments posed by corruption and organized crime, the deleterious effects of Western interference in internal affairs – these are the book's key themes that run like red threads through the narrative. The authors have spared no effort to gather every conceivable snippet of information in the thousands of newspapers, reports from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), UN economic surveys, and fact books they scoured, while Balkan-language sources are conspicuously absent from the bibliography. The result is a truly staggering profusion of dates, names, numbers, all strung together chronologically but with little attempt at coherence or even interpretation. On the positive side, their dogged attempt at comprehensiveness makes this book a useful reference work on regional politics and economics.

Besides examining the reasons for the Balkans' troubles after 1989, Bideleux and Jeffries' account aims to challenge still prevalent Western perceptions of the region. The authors make it clear from the outset that they reject the monolithic stereotyping, lurid fascination with 'primitiveness', and unveiled contempt that has pervaded so much of even recent accounts of Balkan history and politics (one thinks of Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*). Instead of concerning themselves

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with something as conceptually and morally slippery as 'mentalities', the authors focus on what they see as the region's true bane, 'the closely inter-linked legacies of deeply entrenched vertical power structures, vertical power relations, ethnic collectivism and pervasive clientilism, corruption and gangsterism' (8). In their view, these are all consequences of many centuries of Byzantine and Ottoman rule, compounded by Western highhandedness in creating a new state system after World War I, decades of appalling mismanagement under Communist rule, and more recently, the West's perhaps well-intentioned but profoundly short-sighted and often hypocritical meddling in Balkan politics: circumstances and conditions that have so far prevented the establishment of genuinely horizontal power relations and the attendant twin-processes of democratization and liberalization in most of the countries considered here.

The authors' deliberate attempt to steer clear of the cultural paradigm, though certainly commendable, is not without its pitfalls. In trying to fix the blame for past offenses and mistakes on the key actors – individuals like Enver Hoxha, Slobodan Milosevic, or Radovan Karadzic, and Western institutions such as the IMF and the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) – they commit the opposite error of depicting the Balkan peoples as nothing but shadowy pawns in the larger power game of states and despots. In this account, the inhabitants of the Balkan peninsula are for the most part either invisible or they appear as mere victims in rape and murder statistics. Moreover, when the reader learns of yet another campaign of ethnic cleansing, for example, those committing the deeds almost always go unmentioned. If the dozens of name- and faceless killers and rapists get off surprisingly lightly, this is not the case with 'the West'. Indeed, the US and Europe come in for a severe indictment, being accused of everything from tightfistedness, hypocrisy, and pathological xenophobia to engaging in 'human rights imperialism' in Bosnia and Kosovo. Odd to say, it is precisely integration into this 'arrogant and paternalistic' Europe that offers the region the best chance for lasting peace and prosperity. In view of the daunting difficulties that continue to afflict Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo in particular, the authors welcome the speedy admission of these states to the EU. In their opinion, the prospect of EU membership would provide the necessary incentive to overcome ethnic discontent through economic prosperity and to learn democracy by practicing it. Whether the recently admitted Romania and Bulgaria will be able to live up to these expectations remains to be seen. Should such

a 'carrot' not be forthcoming for the other Balkan states, however, the outlook is bleak indeed. Skyrocketing unemployment, staggering crime rates, sluggish economic growth, or even possible collapse as in the case of the scarcely viable Kosovo: these are only the most visible symptoms of a seemingly endemic and potentially crippling instability that could all too easily undermine a still fragile peace. Furthermore, the recent declaration of Montenegrin independence and the 'quasi-state' status of Kosovo may encourage other statelets such as the *Republika Srpska* (so far a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina) to claim independence as well, thus contributing to a further 'Balkanization' of the region. Whatever the outcome, we may be sure that Bideleux and Jeffries have not said the last word on this troubled corner of the world.

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David Powelstock, *Becoming Mikhail Lermontov: The Ironies of Romantic Individualism in Nicholas I's Russia*, Studies in Russian Literature and Theory (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2005), xii + 582 pp.

By any measure, this voluminous literary biography must count as a major contribution to Lermontov studies in English. Through a probing analysis of poems, plays and prose, David Powelstock has attempted to trace the poet's aesthetic development 'in close relation to the cultural and social paradigms of his time' (464). As his subtitle indicates, he finds the key to this in Lermontov's 'radical version' of Romantic individualism (3), so fatefully at odds with the ethos of his milieu: political repression, social conformism, sterile and restrictive cultural and linguistic stereotypes. The first three chapters, devoted to the 'pre-Pushkin period' of juvenilia and Byronism, focus on those aspects which in Powelstock's reading were to be fundamental to Lermontov's 'poetics of liberation' (44): a 'hyperconsciousness of self-other relations' (193), the search for an authentic means of self-expression beyond the limitations of denotative language, the quest for 'self-transfiguration through discourse' (78). Chapter IV is centrally concerned with the 'pivotal text' (26) in the Lermontov story, *The Death of the Poet* (or *A Poet's Death*), in which elegiac reflections on Pushkin's demise give way (especially in the inflammatory coda) to denunciation of those held responsible: