An Interdisciplinary Journal

<http://www.netsoljournal.net/>

Volume 2, Issue 2, pp.36-38, Fall 2017

<https://doi.org/10.24819/netsol2017.09>

Book Review

Thanos Veremis, *A Modern History of the Balkans: Nationalism and Identity in Southeast Europe*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017.

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Thanos Veremis, an Emeritus professor of Political History at the University of Athens, is a preeminent historian and prolific author. This book comparatively covers the political and military history of the Balkans with a special attention to the Balkan economies, militaries, and nationalist creeds as some of these modern issues still plague the region. In the first part of the book, Veremis provides a concise and fast-paced overview of almost two hundred years of Balkan history from the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century to the 1995 NATO intervention in the region. Prior to that overview is an important opening chapter which foreshadows his historiographical views and ideological position on the role of the West in the Balkans. Duly titled “Perceptions and Misreadings”(3), in the first chapter Veremis traces the origins of western and Eurocentric bias towards the Balkan countries back to the Enlightenment writings of eighteenth century British historian Edward Gibbon (5). Gibbon’s views were later reinforced by the writings of Samuel Huntington, who along with other writers over time contributed to a “repetitive, standardized degradation of the Balkans [which] consolidated prejudice in Western minds” (6). Veremis states that this bias would later be repeated in a modern context, with the overly simplistic media representations of the 1992-1995 war in Yugoslavia. Expanding on his premise that ethnic competition and economic upheaval in the region continually give life to nationalist feelings of irredentism, Veremis is extremely critical of the failure of the West to adequately understand or respond to the issues of ethnic identity or refugee repatriation. In a startlingly bold statement, Veremis states that the American brokered Dayton Treaty (1995) to end the Yugoslav war “would [not] have been reached, whether with or without the bombings, if ethnic cleansing had not first been completed. This is the unfortunate conclusion that future proponents of ethnic cleansing will adhere to, unless refugees are repatriated in sufficient numbers” (7). This progression of ethnic nationalism, according to Veremis, needs to be combated with economic and not military might in the future as “the gunboat diplomacy of the past has been replaced by the influence that creditors exert over their indebted clients” (3).

After establishing his historical position as well as historiographical views on the Balkans, Veremis launches into a detailed history of the region and quickly summarizes common elements of shared religion and trade under the Byzantine and later Ottoman empires. As areas of the Balkans (islands in the Ionian Sea, and the Illyrian provinces) came under direct French rule during the age of Napoleon, the radical ideals of the French Revolution first made their way to Greece. The success of the war of independence in 1829 from the Ottoman Empire served as an example for other Balkan nations in the nineteenth century and unknowingly contributed to rival Balkan nationalisms. The nation-states of Romania, Serbia, and Bulgaria would soon follow suit, as Veremis does an admirable job of navigating the complicated history of the region and their conflicting relationships with the Great Powers of the nineteenth century. Continually

returning to his thesis however, Veremis states that while the second half of the nineteenth century was relatively peaceful for Europe and allowed the Balkan countries to gain independence and develop, lack of economic modernization ultimately caused bankruptcy for many countries and led “foreign lenders taking control of large sectors of the economy” (20-21).

Veremis chronicles the political history of the Balkans by studying the relationships that each nation had with both their governments and major foreign powers. The Greeks, Romanians, Southern-Slavs, and Bulgarians all duly navigated the Balkan Wars against first the Ottomans, and then against each other while experiencing varied levels of influence from the major powers of Europe. That influence along with ethnic nationalism would set off the “powder keg of Europe” with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the onset of World War I. After the hardships and great loss of life in the war, Veremis relays how alliances and secret treaties secured territorial gains for Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, but at the expense of Greece, Bulgaria and Albania. Veremis states that it was “the annexation of territories and population exchanges that gave the Balkan countries greater ethnic homogeneity” (46). It was this ethnic competition in addition to population increases and agricultural shortages during the Interwar period that gave rise to the communist parties in the Balkans during the 1920s. As communist parties took full advantage of the economic problems in the Balkan countries, Veremis relays the political reasoning behind the fall of each Balkan nation under the sway of communist rule. Extreme right-wing parties in the Balkans created paramilitary groups, such as the Iron Guard in Romania and the fascist Croat “Ustasha”, which quickly gave rise to authoritarian dictatorships in the region as well. These dictatorships and their communist governments were varied throughout the region with Greece being a notable exception, until World War II would again embroil the region. Providing an excellent encompassing look at the Balkans, Veremis reveals some of his own Greek pride by elaborating on the early successes of the Greek army against the encroaching Italians before relaying that German assistance was needed to fully subjugate the region. Quickly moving on to the influence of Joseph Stalin and later Nicholai Khrushchev in the establishment of postwar communist regimes, Veremis does a really masterful job of explaining the politics of the Balkans up until the fall of communism. Highlighting the political leadership of various monarchs, dictators, and elder statesman, such as Josip Broz Tito in Yugoslavia, Veremis is relentless in explaining the negative effects communism had on an already underdeveloped area of Europe. This chronology effectively takes *Modern History of the Balkans* to the disintegration of Yugoslavia at the end of the Cold War, where Veremis states that the rush of Germany in the European Union to recognize the federal republics of Slovenia and Croatia “opened [a] Pandora’s box” (86), and that the “recognition of Bosnia caused the most bloody ethnic cleansing that Europe had known since World War II” (86).

The second and third parts of Veremis’ work are not as detailed as the first part. Yet it is in the second part that Veremis concisely uses quantitative economic data on gross domestic product (GDP) and slow economic growth rates of Balkan states to prove and expand on his findings about the economic crisis exacerbating the differences of identity among the inhabitants of the region. “Forty-five years of communist rule in Southeastern Europe has left its imprint on the economies of these states”(106) and “most countries registered a worsening of their macro-economic situation, declining GDP, higher deficits, and rising unemployment.”(108) Veremis makes a strong case here that the economic demise of Yugoslavia began nearly ten years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, setting the stage for ethnic competition and rivalry to fill the void left by the eventual fall of communism. Stating that “during the disintegration of Yugoslavia in recent times, nationalism made an overwhelming return as the strongest collective alternative to communist ideology”(97) Veremis expands that a hybrid nationalism was soon transformed by indigenous traditions. Finally it is in the much abbreviated third part of the book that Veremis touches on the contemporary issues still lingering in the region; the status of Kosovo, the settlement of the name issue

between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Greece, and the future of Albanian populated territories in addition to the aspirations of Balkan governments to join the European Union. In the final line of his book, Veremis makes an important prediction grounded in the history of the region; “To attain post-modernity states must first resolve their modern conflicts.”(188).

Overall *A Modern History of the Balkans* is an incredibly well-written book on a very complicated region of the world. Thanos Veremis more than adequately shows his knowledge of the region by thoroughly navigating the complicated webs of political, economic, social, and at times military history of the region. The work will serve students admirably in the future as both a cursory source of history on the region and as an in-depth analysis of underlying factors of nationalism in the Balkans. More novice students of history may find the lack of any maps or visual representations of the Balkans cumbersome. Illustrations or images of many of the leaders, cities or uprisings mentioned in the work would be appreciated by readers trying to gain a better insight into the narrative of the region. That minor omission aside, the greater narrative expressed by Veremis about the failings of the West in the Yugoslav war is most likely to evoke responses from fellow modern historians. Yet as stated in the preface, that is likely the author’s intention all along. In raising the arguments that ethnic groups living within Balkan states, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, are now voluntarily living in segregated societies, Veremis states that future nation-states in the region may be encouraged to invoke violence in order to reach their nationalist goals. This conclusion along with his views on the failures of West and the United States to adequately respond with financial investment or immigration relief, leaves Veremis’ work seemingly unfinished. Will the remaining Balkan states fulfill the necessary requirements for inclusion in the European Union? Will the European Union economically support measures to remedy modernization or financial concerns in the region? Will the Kosovo independence gain a wider international recognition? Although many other questions arise from *A Modern History of the Balkans*, the unique insight that the great historian and author provides on his native region illuminates a subject that has consistently been an area of tangled nationalism, economic crisis, and ethnic conflict. His work is instantly a book that will be used by many students and historians in the future to better understand both the historical context and the origins of aspiring national unification in the Balkans.