

CHAPTER TEN

INSPIRERS

Building the Pyramids: Reflections on High Culture

The national awakenings in the nineteenth century led to a growing preoccupation with territorial borders in the Balkans. The babble of many languages was to be replaced by the languages of nations. Music was to be Greek or Romanian; it was to be Serbian or Croatian; later it might be Yugoslav. Earlier cultural borders had been more obviously aligned either to religious or to social communities. Such borders were never rigid. But formal culture could firm them up in various ways, even if this sometimes flew in the face of lived experience. We might draw a rough line between the formal musical cultures of Islam and Christianity, for example, as also between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. And we might also draw lines between the musical practices of different social groups, contrasting Ottoman music-making associated with Muslim social elites in the eastern Balkans (bearing in mind that Ottoman society did not have a hereditary aristocracy) with the transplanted European music associated with aristocratic, and later bourgeois, cultures further west. We might then draw further lines separating these practices from urban popular music, distinguishing eastern and western varieties of this, and differentiating both these varieties from rural traditional music. By this time our map will look fairly complicated.

It is a comment on the power of nationalism that the borders surrounding the nation state eventually came not just to supersede faith-based and socially determined borders, but to cut across them and even to make use of them, controlling cultural perceptions to a marked degree, even in the face of blatant contraries. This simplifies the map, but at quite a cost. National borders could separate cultures that were essentially the same, just as they could gather cultures that were essentially different. This is most apparent with traditional and popular musical repertoires. But even with elite cultures, fact-finding missions on concert programmes have reinforced the message that surprisingly similar music was heard in

provincial towns right across Europe as a whole.¹ In other words, we learn that just as cultural capitals were multi-national, so provincial venues were uni-repertorial.

How are we to account for the capacity of nationalism to override these basic realities? The point was made in the last chapter. Modern nationalism may have been an ideology created by bourgeois intellectual elites, but its longer-term success was due to its appropriation of social and cultural practices that were already firmly in place. Emergent nations were not exactly reclaiming a culture when they looked to the past, then. Rather they were promoting as a national culture what had previously been self-defined, and in doing so they harnessed universal human instincts (to form groups, to belong, to compete). This was a wider European development, by no means just a Balkan one, and the alliance of culture and politics that it represented was never really a benign one. During the interwar period it came to assume an even darker significance, when an ethos of cultural purity was allied to political fascism with consequences known to all.

In South East Europe, the triumph of the nation state was already signalled by the outcome of the Balkan Wars, but it was formalised by the Treaty of Versailles. Immediately following the Second Balkan War, the picture looked roughly as follows: Greece was as it is today, having secured southern Epirus and southern Macedonia; Bulgaria and Romania were more-or-less as today; a newly independent nation state of Albania had been created, with contested borders; Serbia included much of northern Macedonia; Montenegro was an independent state, though soon to be welded to Serbia; and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia were under Habsburg rule. Following the Treaty of Versailles and the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the major alteration to this picture was the establishment of the first Yugoslavia, which incorporated Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and much of Slovenia.

This outcome effectively 'resolved' a conflict at the heart of Balkan politics – indeed European politics – during the nineteenth century: a conflict between dynastic government and the nation state. In the end the nation state prevailed, as the Ottoman, Habsburg, Hohenzollern and Romanov dynasties crumbled one by one. The new nations had an arbitrary enough character, formed as much from expedient alliances as from

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