States in Search of Legitimacy

Was There Nationalism in the Balkans of the Early Nineteenth Century?

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NINETEENTH CENTURY Balkan nationalism is of interest for at least two reasons other than the inherent fascination of any specific historical events. One is that it was, along with the nationalism in the more northerly parts of Eastern Europe, one of the first examples of the spread of that ideology outside the developed states of the West European core. Consequently, it is possible to look at the growth and maturation of nationalism in the Balkans over a longer period of time than in later cases throughout what has come to be called the Third World. This makes the Balkans a fruitful source of understanding for those who study more recent nationalisms. Second, the fantastic diversity of religions, languages, and geography within a small peninsula that happened to be ruled by the Ottoman Empire makes the Balkans a kind of laboratory in which it is almost possible to simulate the manipulation of variables in order to test several propositions. It would be difficult to find any other area with enough in common to control for certain historical differences, but with so many internal variations of the sort that make comparisons intriguing.

We cannot, in one short article, discuss the entire history of Balkan nationalism. But by concentrating on the four areas where independent Christian governments were established in the early nineteenth century we can judge the adequacy of the main theories proposed to explain the rise of nationalism.

There have been three main types of theoretical explanation of the growth of Balkan nationalism. Good historians and theorists have, of course, taken a mixture of these into account, but in many cases, one of the three is considered more central than the others. Even in synthetic explanations, the analytic distinctions between them remain clear.

The oldest notion is that nationalism was always present, even if it remained latent for long periods of time. Like a dormant volcano, it would erupt, as in the nineteenth century, because of certain favorable circumstances. But these circumstances did not create the essence of nationalism, they only allowed it to become manifest. Such an approach may seem a bit old fashioned now, and indeed its strongest proponents, like R. W. Seton-Watson (1917) or Nicolae Iorga (1905), tend to be writers of the past. Contemporary native historians
from the Balkans continue to suggest that Serbs, Romanians, and the others were nations-in-waiting, ready to reassert their national independence, throughout the Ottoman Empire. The glorious names of medieval battles and princes are rolled out to show that even then there was nationalism. (e.g., Jelavich and Jelavich 1963, 1977; Petrovich 1980) A more sinister version of this theoretical approach is a lively part of official government propaganda throughout the Balkans, and is used to justify all manner of incompetence and tyranny. Romanians, for example, now claim 2,050 years of steadfast national heroism in defense of the national ideal. (Ceaușescu 1979)

A second approach is to see nationalism outside of Western Europe as a Western import. While recognizing that there were linguistic and religious groups that were culturally conscious, Kedourie (1960) believes that it was the introduction of Western, particularly German Romantic nationalist ideology that gave non-Western peoples the notion that they should create states based on such characteristics. It then followed that these states should strive to incorporate culturally similar people outside their boundaries, and to exclude, assimilate, or restrict the freedoms of those within their boundaries who did not share the national culture.

The third approach to nationalism is structural. Modernization, as described in the works of Lerner (1964) and Deutsch (1953), creates the social and economic circumstances which break down the old, local solidarities and forge new, larger national ones. While Lerner and Deutsch stressed the role of communications, there can be a variety of structural changes used to explain the rise of nationalisms within the Ottoman Empire. There is a Marxist version of the structural theory as well. Out of the collapse of Ottoman feudalism there came increasing commerce, the rise of national bourgeoisies, and, as in the West, the consequent development of nationalism. (Vucinich 1955, 1961; Oțetea 1964)

We must stress that there is some truth in all of these explanations. The relative merits of each approach can be judged by briefly reviewing the situation of the Ottoman Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and by comparing the birth of several of the new Balkan states.

The Decline of the Ottoman Empire

The reasons for the decline of the Ottoman Empire are neither mysterious nor unique. By the late sixteenth century the Empire had reached geographical limits beyond which it could not expand because its borders were simply too far from its central bases to permit effective campaigning. Whether against the Westerners who were becoming technologically more advanced than the Ottomans, or against the Persians, who were not, fighting bogged down into interminable, inconclusive border warfare whose rewards could not possibly cover the costs of fighting. As the Empire lost the ability to hand out new benefits to its warrior elites, it gradually turned in on itself. Internal competition for rewards and hence corruption increased. Governors and military garrisons