


SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS
INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

LIII



2022

BALCANICA

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ANNUAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

UDC 930.85(4-12)

BELGRADE 2022

ISSN 0350-7653
eISSN 2406-0801

ALBERTO BASCIANI, EGIDIO IVETIC, *ITALIA E BALCANI. STORIA DI UNA PROSSIMITÀ*, BOLOGNA: IL MULLINO, 2021.

Reviewed by Bogdan Živković*

In 2021, the Italian public was presented with a new publication by Alberto Basciani and Egidio Ivetic. The two authors belong to the select few Italian scholars who are the national authorities on the history of the Balkans. Therefore, Basciani and Ivetic joined forces to write a book on the Balkans. The product of their efforts is not a classic voluminous history of the Balkans or Italian-Balkan entanglements. In fact, it is a 180 pages breviary, a prelude that can help students and scholars in their quest to study and understand the Balkans and the Italian policies in the Balkans.

The Introduction and Chapters One and Two were written by Ivetic. In the Introduction, he manages to convincingly explain the methodological framework of the book. The outlook of the authors was crucially determined by the perception of Italy and the Balkans as two historical regions in Europe. More broadly speaking, Basciani and Ivetic intended to write a history of Europe by writing the history of its two regions. Inspired by the German approach of *Geschichtsregion*, i.e., history of regions, the two authors focused on a comparative approach. In the Introduction, Ivetic underlines a few of notions crucial for understanding the two neighbouring regions and their entangled histories. The first is the role of the Adriatic up to the mid-18th century. In that period, the Adriatic Sea was the crucial connection between the two peninsulas and the main factor of their proximity. It was not a barrier but a space that brought them closer. The second notion Ivetic underlines in the Introduction and expands on later on is the political passivity of the Balkans. Namely, the Balkan Peninsula was the battleground of imperial ambitions, incapable of exporting its dominance. Hence, the history of the

Balkan connections with Italy was marked by a similar dynamic. With the irrelevant exception of Ottoman conquests in Southern Italy, the millennial history of contacts between Italy and the Balkans was exclusively marked by Italian expansion (political, economic or cultural) towards the Balkans.

Ivetic uses the first chapter of the book to expand on some of the concepts presented in the Introduction. Thus, the title of the first chapter is: Historical Regions of Europe (*Regioni storiche d'Europa*). In this chapter, the author offers various interpretative guidelines for understanding the history of the Balkans. For instance, Ivetic extensively quotes Jovan Cvijić, whose anthropological studies remain seminal for understanding the region, or uses the history of the Balkans as a case study for the surviving relevance of the national idea. But among various ideas entertained by the author in this chapter, the most important is his focus on the notion of regions. This is, in fact, the crucial methodological notion on which the book rests. Ivetic states that a region should be understood as “subcontinental” and “supranational”. In this interpretative key, he connects the three peninsulas that form Southern Europe – the Iberian, Apennine and Balkan peninsulas. The book, as a short comparative history of the latter two, was devised as a contribution to the broader regional history of Southern Europe.

Chapter Two, also by Ivetic, opens the chronological narration of the book. Here the author gives a brief summary of the millennial history of Italian-Balkan contacts, from the early Venetian and Byzantine times

* bogdan.zivkovic@bi.sanu.ac.rs
Institute for Balkan Studies SASA, Belgrade, Serbia

up to the unification of Italy. Ivetic underlines the Byzantine impact on the creation of the Balkans as a separate cultural, political, and civilizational entity. On the other hand, he focuses on the Venetian Republic as the main Italian actor on the Balkan Peninsula, which connected the two regions through its dominance in the Adriatic.

The subsequent three chapters, written by Basciani, are a chronological continuation of the account offered by Ivetic in Chapter Two. Chapter Three, *The Kingdom of Italy and the Balkans*, deals with the second half of the 19th century. In this chapter, Basciani demonstrates how, with the Italian unification, the Balkan Peninsula became one of the foreign policy priorities of the new state. The newly founded kingdom wanted to assert itself internationally as a great power that should have a say in the future of Europe. The crisis of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans presented itself as the ideal opportunity for Italy to accomplish such a role. However, a stronger Italian impact in the Balkans was not seen in this period. The reasons for that was the stronger focus of Rome on Africa and the Italian inability to match the resources and impact of Austria-Hungary.

In Chapter Four, Basciani covers the period from 1914 to 1945, describing the impact of World War I, fascist foreign policy and World War II on the relations between the Italian and the Balkan Peninsula. Despite the initial pro-Serb sentiments in Italy during 1914, Basciani underlines how, primarily due to their conflicting interests in Albania, Italy and Serbia, the new Balkan hegemon, became geopolitical enemies. The ending of World War I put Serbia on the side of the pro-status quo victors, while Italy found itself in the group of revisionist countries, aiming to dramatically change the international order. Thus, the fascist Italy had a strong and active policy in the Balkans aimed at increasing the Italian political, economic and cultural impact. While such policies were somewhat successful and

somewhat overshadowed by Berlin's advance in the Balkans, the end of World War II shattered their future.

As Basciani shows in the final chapter, 1945 was a historical watershed in Italian-Balkan relations. It was the year that put an end to Italian territorial aspirations in the Balkan Peninsula. During the Cold War and the post-1989 era, the Italian political influence in the Balkans waned. The author still highlights some political activities – like the actions of Gianni De Michelis and Giulio Andreotti aimed at preserving the status quo in Yugoslavia, or the interests of the Holy See and the industry in Northern Italy to facilitate Slovenian and Croatian aspirations towards national independence. However, such actions were not decisive like the ones that came from Berlin or Washington. Hence, the post-1945 connections between Italy and the Balkans should be identified elsewhere. As Basciani successfully underlines, such connections were present in the influence of Italian mass culture in the Balkans and in the large-scale migrations from the Balkans to Italy, particularly from Romania to Italy.

The importance of the volume by Ivetic and Basciani is not merely that it gives a brief, concise and comprehensive history of the relations between the Italy and the Balkans although writing a millennial history in only 180 pages and doing so in such a convincing manner is a rather impressive feat. However, a more important characteristic of this book is the ability of its authors to offer methodological and interpretative guidelines to the reader. Hence, this book offers an outlook on the Italian-Balkan history, a pathway for the reader to explore other historiographical works on this topic, comprehend them and put them in a broader context. Basciani and Ivetic have not written a brief history of the contacts between the two peninsulas, but an intellectually provoking text that challenges old interpretations and offers new ones, vastly enriching historical scholarship on Italian-Balkan topics.

ISSN 0350-7653



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