The Balkans—

Many Peoples, Many Problems

The Long Story of Differences

Early Settlers

The Albanians sometimes claim to be the oldest people in the peninsula. They have certainly been there at least since Greek and Roman times. They speak a language of their own, somewhat related to ancient Latin. It has been put into written form only in recent times. Inside Albania more than 90 per cent of the population is Albanian. Many Albanians also live in Yugoslavia, Greece, and even in southern Italy.

Greeks have occupied the southern end of the peninsula since a thousand years before the birth of Christ. It was here that they created classical civilization and the world’s first democracy.

Almost everybody agrees that the poets, playwrights, and philosophers, the architects and the sculptors of ancient Greece were superb in their lines. The many fine examples of their work that have been preserved to the present day compare favorably in beauty and soundness with anything the
human race has since produced. During the intervening centuries Greece has absorbed many invaders. These have left their mark, but in essentials the people and the language of modern Greece are much the same as those of ancient Greece.

Although many of our most advanced ideas and practices in modern democracy came from the ancient Greeks, they, like all later peoples, had difficulty in getting along with their neighbors. The city-states in which they lived fought constantly with one another. Partly for this reason the Greeks were conquered in the fourth century B.C. by their far less advanced and cultivated kinsmen—the Macedonians. The Macedonian Empire, which Alexander the Great carried all the way to India, in turn dissolved before the forces of Rome in the second century B.C. And several hundred years after the Romans had conquered Greece, whose literature and art they loved and imitated, barbarian Germanic tribes swept down upon the Roman Empire and contributed to its slow decline during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

The Rhine-Danube line was essentially the farthest limit of the Roman Empire in Europe. But for a couple of centuries the Romans held an outpost north of the Danube, which they called Dacia. Modern Dacia still proudly calls itself “Romania”—land of the Romans. The modern Romanians claim descent from the Roman soldiers and colonists of Dacia, a claim disputed by their enemies. It is borne out to some extent, however, by the fact that the Romanian language is a Latin tongue, based on the language the Romans spoke. It is related to modern Italian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, although full of Slavic and Turkish words.

Before Rome fell, the Empire had acquired a second center at Byzantium, whose Christian name was Constantinople. The common name for it was “The City,” a Greek phrase which the Turks have kept and modified as “Istanbul.” There, for a thousand years after Rome itself had fallen and its Empire in the West had disappeared, the Eastern Roman Empire continued to rule. This Eastern or Byzantine Empire included the Balkan Peninsula.
Greek was its language, and its laws and customs reflected Greek, Roman, and Oriental influences, since Byzantium was a gateway between East and West.

**Later Arrivals**

Slavic tribes began to move into the Balkan part of the Byzantine Empire about 570–700 A.D. The Slavs are a people whose original home is now thought to have been in the region of the Priepet marshes between Russia and Poland. Squeezed between Germanic peoples pressing from the north and west, and Asiatic peoples pushing from the east, some of the Slavs flowed southward into the Balkan Peninsula. It was an infiltrating movement rather than an invasion; its farthest spearheads penetrated and were absorbed into the Greek population.

The Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes are the present-day descendants of these migrant Slavs. They are collectively known as Yugo-slavs, that is, **South Slavs**. The northern Slavic groups, also descended from the same original source, include the Russians, Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks. They all speak related Slavic languages and are more or less conscious of their common ancestry.

The Bulgarians got their name from the Bulgars, an Asiatic Tartar tribe which arrived in the seventh century. The newcomers were gradually absorbed into the Slavic population and took over its Slavic language.

Twice during the Middle Ages the Bulgarians founded powerful states which were put down only at great cost by the Byzantines. Once the Serbs did the same. The important fact today about these medieval empires is that at different times they controlled much of the same territory. The modern Serbs and Bulgars (like other Balkan peoples, and like the Hungarians) have persistently claimed for their present dominion all the territory ruled over by these remote ancestors of theirs. So they have often claimed the same areas. It has been said that all Balkan territorial claims are just—if you go back to the right place in history. Balkan boundary disputes today would be far less serious were it not for the clashing memories of these long-dead
empires.

One other people, the Vlachs, should be mentioned now to complete the confusing picture. The Vlachs are wandering herdsmen or nomads who live in the mountainous regions of the peninsula and form a more or less important minority in all the Balkan countries except Albania. Their language is a dialect of Romanian and they are closely akin to the Romanians. Their name survives in the Romanian province of Wallachia, where Bucharest is located.

**Christians of Two Churches**

The Greeks belonged to the Mediterranean world, and thus were Christianized within the first few centuries after Christ. The rest of the Balkan peoples remained pagans of various sorts until Christian missionaries were sent to convert them during the Middle Ages.

When the Byzantine or Orthodox Christian church quarreled with and split from the Roman or Catholic church in 1054, most of the Balkan peoples followed Byzantium and remained Orthodox. Only in the west of the peninsula, the Croat and Slovene peoples and a few Albanians were near enough to Italy to fall under Western influence and follow Rome. Thus, the Greeks, the Bulgars, the Romanians, the Serbs, and some Albanians are today Orthodox, while some Albanians, the Croats, and Slovenes are Roman Catholic. Orthodox priests may marry, while Catholic priests may not,, and there are many other differences between the faiths.

The Catholic-Orthodox split is most important in modern Yugoslavia, where there has often been bad feeling between the Orthodox Serbs and the Roman Catholic Croats. Although the Serbs and Croats speak the same language, the Serbs write it in an alphabet like the Russian, called Cyrillic, while the Croats use the Latin alphabet, like ours. The Slovene language is much like Serbo-Croatian and is also written in Latin script.

**Islamic Invasion**

For many centuries Byzantium stood as a buffer for Europe against the
East. It held off the Persians and the Arabs. Later, when the Turks appeared from central Asia, it held them off too, for a time. But in 1453 the Turks took Constantinople (Byzantium) and went on to conquer nearly all the Balkans, which they had begun to penetrate long before.

The Turks were—and are—Moslems, followers of the prophet Mohammed and believers in the religion known as Islam. They were a curious mixture of cruel conquerors and tolerant rulers. They permitted their Christian subjects to worship as they wished, but to a great extent denied them economic, social, and political opportunities. The only sure way to obtain political power and other privileges was to become a Moslem.

Most of the people in the Balkans stayed Christian; a great many Albanians, however, became Moslems, and today 70 per cent of the population of Albania is of that faith. In a part of Yugoslavia too—the provinces called Bosnia and Herzegovina—some of the native Serb population became Moslems. So today in the heart of the Orthodox regions of Yugoslavia there is a sizable Moslem population of Serbian blood. There are also some Turkish Moslems in Yugoslavia. Bulgaria too has both Slavic and Turkish Moslems. The Turks who used to live in Greece were almost all exchanged after 1923 for Greeks living in Turkey.

The Turkish conquest took place gradually. The Christian populations fought it, and the national heroes of the Balkan peoples were all fighters against the Turks. The anniversary of the great Serb defeat at Kossovo in 1389 is still the national holiday, and Kossovo is the Serb historic shrine. Skanderbeg, who battled the Turks a century later, has become the great hero of the Albanians. The infant son of the present exiled King Zog is named for him.

The past and the fight against the Turks seem very close everywhere in the Balkans, but nowhere more so than in Montenegro, now part of Yugoslavia, but for five hundred years a tiny independent state. On their rocky highlands the Serb Orthodox inhabitants of Montenegro fought for centuries against the Turk and kept their freedom.
Under Turkish Rule

Turkish penetration of the Balkans began with the conquest of Macedonia and Thessaly shortly before 1400. Thereafter for a little more than five hundred years the Turks dominated the Balkan Peninsula in whole or in part. A small corner of it is still Turkish.

During the first half of this period the Turkish sultans were mostly vigorous and able men. They fought war after war and spent most of their time extending the Ottoman Empire in all directions. Their armies overran the plains of Hungary and even reached the gates of Vienna. Their navies sailed the Mediterranean as far west as Spain.

Conquered peoples in the Balkans were harshly treated. The upper classes and the leaders among the subject peoples were systematically killed off. Good lands were confiscated by the sultan and distributed among his faithful officers. The small farmers were reduced to impoverished peasant-laborers and serfs, obliged to contribute personal service to the landholders.

All non-Moslems had to pay a special head tax, and once every four years the sultan’s agents went through the Christian villages seizing one-fifth of all boys between the ages of six and nine. The strongest and most intelligent were chosen. They were taken into the corps of Janissaries—the standing army. For two hundred years, until it was abolished in 1676, this practice was one of the chief hardships inflicted on the Christians. Under such oppressive measures as these the subject races were almost destroyed.

The Turkish Grip Loosens

During the second half of the period of Turkish domination, however, the lot of the Christians in the Balkans gradually improved. Turkish power, especially after the failure to capture Vienna in 1683, began to decline. The sultans were frequently weaklings who devoted themselves to oriental luxury and extravagance, neglecting their armies and navies.

Little by little the outlying provinces of the empire were whittled away.
Strong competition made itself felt even in the eastern Mediterranean and by 1700 the Venetians succeeded in establishing a firm foothold in southern Greece and the Aegean Islands.

Internally the central government was beginning to break down. As a result, some local self-government, within certain limitations, again developed in the Christian towns and villages and was not put down by the Turks. A few communities, by paying fixed tributes, got some advantages and liberties for themselves.

The Turks pulled out more and more from active participation in administrative work. They regarded it as they did commerce and other business—something unworthy of Moslems. Cash payments took the place of personal service and the sale of offices became widespread.

The Christians, especially the Greeks, took advantage of the opportunities offered them. They entered increasingly into the administrative and commercial careers now opening to them. This led in time to a lightening of the crushing conditions of living. A gradual revival of education brought with it a growth of national feeling. Contacts with Western civilization and liberal ideas also helped to stimulate a desire for political liberty in the Balkan peoples.

**Fighting for Freedom**

Most of the fighting that gave the Balkans their reputation for disorder really goes back to the struggles of the various peoples for freedom from the Turks. Those struggles occupied the whole of the nineteenth century and were not finally won until 1913. One by one the Balkan countries began to emerge as separate states; weak, at first, and with only a small part of the territory they aimed to liberate.

The Montenegrins, who never submitted to the Turks, had always managed to keep at least a tiny part of their almost inaccessible mountains free. In 1918 they joined with their Slavic kinsmen as part of Yugoslavia, but they still cherish proud memories of their record in resisting Moslem conquest.
Serbia. The first of the subject peoples to break away from Turkish misrule were the Serbs. The laxity of Turkish administration had enabled many of the Serbian peasants to acquire considerable property. Though illiterate and uneducated they formed a substantial class of well-to-do farmers. But Turkish troops that the central government could not control carried out organized robbery, massacre, and oppression. They made living conditions so intolerable that all who could find arms joined in the fight for liberation.

Serbian revolt began in 1804 under the leadership of George Petrovich known as Karageorge, or Black George, a sturdy, wealthy farmer and pig raiser who became a national hero. He was the direct ancestor of the present King Peter of Yugoslavia who still bears the family name, Karageorgevich. Karageorge, after ten years and more of fighting, was himself slain by treachery, and Milosh Obrenovich, member of a rival Serbian dynasty, became hereditary prince.

The new state of Serbia was small and backward. The government was autocratic and far from perfect. But it was better than Turkish rule and it set about providing education for some of the people at least. The Serbs slowly increased their power and the size of their country as the Turkish Empire continued to crumble.

Greece. The next people to shake off Turkish domination were the Greeks. They too had already, in fairly large numbers, improved their economic lot and obtained a good deal of influence and power. As they prospered in shipping and trade they had become known throughout the Mediterranean and were being employed more and more by the Turks in important administrative and political offices. Through the Patriarchate in Constantinople they had supreme jurisdiction over the Christian church not only in the Balkans but in all Turkish territory. They were also able to maintain schools in some places and the educated elements kept national consciousness alive.

The majority of the people were small farmers many of whom had in effect acquired ownership of their lands. Although their towns and villages were
allowed some degree of local self-government, the general conditions of life under Turkish maladministration were still unbearable to free-minded men.

The Greeks therefore revolted in 1821. After eight years of war with many ups and downs, and with some useful help from England, France, and Russia, they won their independence. Lord Byron, one of England’s great romantic poets, died in Greece in 1824 while helping the Greeks in their struggle. Many other friends of Greece from the liberal Western countries also gave valuable help.

The new state, organized as a kingdom, was first allowed to hold only a small part of the territory inhabited by Greeks; but like Serbia, it grew in strength and size during the nineteenth century.

Romania. The successful outcome of the Greek Revolution led to a considerable improvement of living conditions in Romania—where indeed the first Greek revolt had started in 1821 only to be speedily crushed. Harsh treatment of the Romanian peasants was somewhat eased and more local self-rule was permitted. The two provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia were put under the authority of governors chosen from the Romanian aristocracy which still survived. These “princes” often purchased their appointments and usually looked out for themselves first and then for the interests of the sultan or of the Russian or Austrian emperors. They gave little attention to the needs and wishes of the common people.

Turkish sovereignty lasted in Romania until 1856, when the two principalities united and asserted their independence. In 1881 Romania became a kingdom, and its German prince, related to the German imperial family, was established on the throne as Charles I. The exiled King Carol and his son, the present King Michael, are descendants of that first king. In the course of the years Romania, too, consolidated her position, and added a substantial amount of neighboring territory to the lands she originally possessed.

**Bulgaria.** The Bulgarians were slow to express and to achieve a national
desire for liberty. The success of the neighboring states in winning independence did not leave them unaffected, however. Some stirrings of national feeling had already appeared, before the first important gain came in 1870. The Turkish sultan, pleased with the chance to split his Orthodox subjects, authorized the Bulgarians to secede from the Patriarchate in Constantinople and to establish their own church under a Bulgarian primate called the Exarch. The new church became an important factor in the growth of nationalism.

A revolt against the Turks flared up in 187 and ultimately led to sympathetic Russian intervention and the Russo-Turkish War of 1877. When peace was made in 1878 almost complete self-rule was allowed in two Bulgarian principalities. Through British and Austrian influence they were much reduced in size as compared with the Russian plan for a “Greater Bulgaria.” In 1886 real independence was won when the two principalities were united into a single kingdom under a German prince who took the throne as King Ferdinand. The late King Boris was his son, and the present regency governs in the name of his infant grandson, Prince Simeon.

**Albania.** The Albanians were the last of the Balkan peoples to be freed from Turkish sovereignty. They were famous for their bravery as officers and soldiers in the sultan’s armies and as guerrilla fighters, and they were noted for their individualism and their resistance to authority. But they were so split up at home by internal feuds, by religious and other differences, that they were unable to unite in a movement for liberty. Their number was also far too small to give them any real prospect of success against the Turkish Empire.

The landowning Moslems were well to do and arrogant, while the masses of the Albanian people were mere unlettered tillers of the soil, little better than serfs. Finally, in 1913 after the Balkan Wars, independence came as a gift from the European powers. In a compromise settlement of their own rivalries they set up the tiny state of Albania as a monarchy under a German princeling who took the title Bret or king.