H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Maria Todorova, ed. *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory.* New York City: New York University Press, 2004. x + 374 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8279-8.

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Published on HABSBURG (January, 2004)

Normalizing the Balkans

It has been the consensus among scholars in North America and Europe that the Balkans has a problem with nationalism. The roots of that conviction lie in the recent turbulent Yugoslav conflicts, which were seen as demonstrating that the Balkans were completely different from the rest of Europe. Maria Todorova refuted this notion in *Imagining the Balkans*, arguing instead that these wars in fact constituted a Europeanization of the region, its ultimate transformation into a series of distinct homogeneous nation-states.[1] In her introduction to the collection of essays in *Balkan Identities*, Todorova once more takes up this argument, presenting the essays as "an attempt to normalize the Balkans" (p. 17)–to approach nation and nationalism in the region not as a pathological phenomenon peculiar to the peninsula, but as part of broader historical processes. This is a much-needed corrective in scholarship on the Yugoslav conflicts, both of the tendency to portray the region as riven by primordial ethnic hatreds, and of the opposite approach, which holds that nationalism played a lesser role in the disintegration of the country than other economic and political factors.

This project is also significant in that it is representative of a broader trend of bringing scholars from East and West into dialogue.[2] The essays themselves came out of an international conference held in June 1999. Such collaborative efforts force Western scholars to deal with indigenous perspectives, break down walls of intellectual isolation that were erected during the Cold War, and provide opportunities for cross-fertilization.

Some of the essays are quite excellent and contribute new perspectives. Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers's fascinating article offers insights into the utilization of the past in transitional periods. She explores the uses of tradition in present day Albania, contrasting the revival of Kanun law among the mountain villagers of Northern Albania to the myths of origin conjured by the Aromanians in the post-communist period. In both cases, actors mobilize the past to situate themselves within a reconfiguring society and jockey for scarce resources. Schwandner-Sievers sees the Aromanians as adopting a more promising strategy, which she describes as globalizing; whereas the revival of the blood feud in Albania cuts off the highlands from the rest of the country, the Aromanians make

alliances with the Greeks or the Romanians on the basis of common ancestry, creating access to goods across boundaries.

Other more historical essays are focused on textual analysis. Diana Mishkova and Robert Shannan Peckham offer nuanced appraisals of the mobilization of national myths by politicians during the nation-building era in the Balkans. Mishkova sees national myths as having been mobilized both in Serbia and Romania in the late 19th century by political elites who were painfully aware of the backwardness of their countries in relation to Western Europe, and who sought answers to this dilemma in the past. In Serbia, the liberal politicians "discovered" institutions of representative democratic rule in the traditional peasant assemblies and collective ownership, an idea that would later be taken up by the radicals to mobilize the peasants. In the Romanian case, the presence of a substantial propertied class fostered the rise of a political project based on the cult of private property by the ancient Dacians. In both cases, the elite argued that the Ottoman regime was oppressing the natural liberal-democratic tendencies of their people. Shannan Peckham explores how regional traditions in Greece were mobilized as examples of quintessential "Greek-ness," at the same time as regional differences were being eliminated as part of an integrative nation-building process.

Keith Brown's essay explores national myths as a genre, searching for the archetypal hero and villain. He compares the life story of Boris Sarafov, a participant in the Macedonian liberation struggle in the early twentieth century, to the manner in which he has been remembered, and compares these narratives to other narratives of heroism and villainy. He argues that villains are personalities that are presented as impure or hybrid, individuals who cannot be relied upon because they are not fixed but move between two worlds, such as shepherds. Thus, Sarafov was ultimately portrayed as a villain because he could not be reliably be ascribed to one side. This raises the performative function of national myths and patriotic history more generally: to proscribe ambiguous identities as threatening to the integrity of the nation.

Unfortunately, as a whole this collection presents a number of shortcomings. This is partly a testament to the difficulty of creating a collection of essays that really holds together, particularly one that is multi-disciplinary. While some of the essays follow the conventions of writing in the social sciences, others adopt unconventional formats, combining historical materials with personal ruminations, as in Dunja Rihtman-Augustin's essay on the history of Ban Jelacic square in Zagreb, or presenting materials as a series of vignettes followed by a few reflections, as in Anastasia Karakasidou's comparison of various narratives of Greek national hero Pavlos Melas. While creative approaches to material can produce fascinating results, in these cases more rigorous analysis would have been more compelling. Furthermore, some essays read like compilations of facts without adequate analysis, while yet others present analysis without facts. The essay on "War Memorials and Heroes in 20th century Romania," written by the usually excellent Maria Bucur, fits into the first category, presenting what seems to be a chronology of memorializing practices in Romania. Alexander Kiossev's article on Bulgarian literature textbooks fits into the second category, floating in the rarefied atmosphere of theory without ever telling the reader anything about the textbooks! Several of the essays would also have benefited from more extensive editing; the reader tires from trying to interpret convoluted formulations.

But there are also deeper methodological problems. The collection claims to be an effort to normalize the Balkans by situating them in broader historical processes. Despite this, most of the essays focus exclusively on discourse, examining in particular collective memory and the role of the past in nationalist rhetoric. This necessarily highlights the specificity of the Balkan case by highlighting traditions and current discourses peculiar to the region. Nearly all the essays also mostly focus on the role of the state or of cultural elites (such as writers, film-makers, the media) in shaping nationalist discourse, paying little attention to the responses of ordinary people to the deployment of these discourses. Thus, although Todorova acknowledges the need to consider how it is that collective memory is "activated" in people's consciousness and becomes a motor for action, this topic is left largely unexplored. And yet it would seem that it is not possible to properly situate discourse within practices without considering all the actors involved. Of those essays that do consider the deployment of discourse, Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers's essay is the most thought-provoking.

Lastly, this collection cannot help but point to a missed opportunity to compare the cases of the different Balkan countries. This is especially evident when considering the essays on history textbooks. A great deal of ink has been spilled on the rewriting of history textbooks in the region, but such efforts have rarely gone beyond enumerating the falsifications and manipulations

introduced in the new texts. And yet, a concurrent reading of Dubravka Stojanovic's consideration of the Serbian case and Mirela-Luminita Murgescu's essay on the Romanian case raises some interesting questions. Why is it that Serbian textbooks are anxious to discuss their co-nationals in Bosnia, whereas Romanian textbooks are not interested in Romanians in the Soviet Union? Why is it that Serbian textbooks deal with the recent history in the most ideological terms while Romanian textbooks are cautious in their presentation of recent history, precisely because it is controversial? Those essays that adopted a comparative approach, such as Diana Mishkova's essay on the uses of tradition by nineteenth and early twentieth century Serbian and Romanian politicians, and Keith Brown's analysis of national heroes and villains, are among the most successful essays in this volume.

Despite its shortcomings, *Balkan Identities* sets an ambitious agenda for students of the Balkans and of nationalism more generally. As contact between scholars inside and outside the region becomes more frequent, it is to be hoped that these questions will be addressed in ever greater depth.

Notes

[1]. Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Reviewed by Gale Stokes on HABSBURG: `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=1749878161715`

[2]. Another example of this trend is *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe* , ed. John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest: CEU Press, 2004).