

THE OTTOMANS IN THE BALKANS

Otomanii în Balcani

Abstract: *The paper deals with some aspects of the history of the Balkans under the rule of Ottomans. Undoubtedly the great civilizations (Greek, Roman, Byzantine) left deep traces in this part of Europe. But the Ottoman civilization perfected the Balkan civilization in a completely remarkable way, influencing it as no other civilization did. The word Balkan has a Turkish origin and means “mountain”. Its earliest mention appears in a 14th-century Arab map, in which the Haemus Mons are referred to as Balkan. At the beginning of the 14th century the leaders of various Balkan states fight among themselves for domination in the area, and they don't realize that a new danger appeared in the south. In 1362 the Ottoman Turks conquer Adrianople; this would be the beginning of their conquest in the Balkan Peninsula which will end after a century. The impact of Ottoman Turkish rule upon all sectors of Balkan society was profound. In the Balkans especially the big cities become Islamic, although the Ottoman Empire has a relative tolerance for other religious confessions. This happened as a result of a deliberate forced migration state policy, but also due to the large number of converts to Islam. Under Ottomans the economic life in the Balkans was controlled by guilds. Taxes on production and on commercial activities provided the bulk of the money needed for the Empire's operation. Centuries of Ottoman rule marked the urban landscape of the Balkans as well as the everyday life of the Balkan people. The influence of Ottoman rule is often viewed with hostility, especially in the Balkan world. Sometimes it is about prejudices without a real historical basis or real arguments.*

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire expansion, Balkan economy, social system, Islamic conversion, Muslim, Christians.*

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Countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia, Greece, and Turkey are generally considered to be part of the Balkan region, although these countries are partially or wholly within the Balkan Peninsula.

We open this paper with the words of Andrew Baruch Wachtel who said that “the history of the Balkans is found in the succession of

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civilizations that have conquered the region”¹. Undoubtedly the great cultures - Greek, Roman, Byzantine - have left deep traces in this part of Europe. But the Ottoman civilization perfected in a completely remarkable way the Balkan one, influencing it as no other civilization did. “At the end of the twentieth century, people spoke as if the Balkans had existed forever. However, two hundred years earlier they had not yet come into being. It was not the Balkans but «Rumeli» that the Ottomans ruled, the formerly «Roman» lands that they had conquered from Constantinople.”²

The word “Balkan” has a Turkish origin and means “mountain”. The peninsula with this name is certainly dominated by this type of landform - mountains, especially in the west. The Balkan Mountains extend from east to west, from the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea, through Bulgaria to Albania. The northern limit of the region extends to the Julian Alps and the Carpathians, while the southern limit is represented by the south of Greece. Among these ranges extensive areas of good arable land are relatively scarce, though the valleys of the Danube, Sava, and Vardar rivers, eastern Bulgaria, parts of the Aegean Sea coast, and especially the Danubian Plain are exceptions.

The earliest mention of the name appears in an early 14th-century Arab map in which the Haemus Mons are referred to as „Balkan”. Maria Todorova wrote in her book, *Imagining the Balkans*, that:

*“the earliest mention of the name Balkan known to me comes from a fifteenth century memorandum of the Italian humanist writer and diplomat Filippo Buonaccorsi Callimaco (Philippus Callimachees, 1437 - 1496). (...) In his 1490 memorandum to Pope Innocent VIII, Callimaco wrote that the local people used the name Balkan for the mountain”*³.

The Ottoman State Archives [Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi] preserved the first Ottoman document dated from 1565 which mentions the name “Balkan”. According to Maria Todorova:

*“it has been widely accepted that «Balkan» is a word and name that entered the peninsula with the arrival of the Ottoman Turks. (...) There has been no documented mention of the word from the pre-Ottoman era, despite the fact that Turkic or Turco-Iranian tribes had settled or were passing through the peninsula: the Bulgarians in the late seventh century who created the Bulgarian state, the Pechenegs, Uz and Kumans between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the latter playing an important part in Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Romanian history”*⁴.

The Ottoman Empire was one of the greatest, most extensive, and longest-lasting empires in the history of the world.⁵ The Ottoman state was

¹ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Balkans in Word History*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 2.

² Mark Mazower, *The Balkans. A Short History*, Modern Library, 2002, p. XXV.

³ Maria Nikolaeva Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 22.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁵ Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 3.

born of the Kayi tribe, which descended from the large family of Oguz Turks. In the second half of the 13th century the Seljuk sultan Alauddin I gave a territory located in northeast Anatolia, at Sogut, on the border with the Byzantine Empire, as feud to Ertuğrul⁶. From this marginal realm Ertugrul's successor, Osman, took advantage of the existing rivalry between Seljuk Turks, Byzantines, the Il-Khanid Mongol dynasty in Iran, the Tatars of the Golden Horde, and the Mamelukes in Egypt to get out of the tutelage of the Seljuk Sultanate (which was dismantled in ten provinces, one of them being Osman's emirate). His son, Orhan, continued his policy of conquests in the detriment of Byzantium and the adjacent provinces. His brother, Alauddin, became a state visionary, took a series of administrative, military, and fiscal measures. He established the body of the janissaries – an elite infantry with an initial count of 1,000 people, but constantly growing – and the cavalry. The military power of the Ottomans was highly superior to those of the Byzantine armies and the Balkan states. The Ottoman policy of granting the largest part of the newly conquered territories to the aristocracy secured its full support to the state in the latter's territorial expansion.

At the beginning of the 14th century the leaders of various Balkan states fought among themselves for domination in the area, and they didn't realize that a new danger had appeared in the south. In 1362 the Ottoman Turks conquered Adrianople - Edirne, modern Turkey, the gateway to the Balkans. This was the beginning of their conquest in the Balkan Peninsula which will only end after a century. Serbia was conquered in 1389, Bulgaria in 1396, Constantinople in 1453, Bosnia in 1463, Herzegovina in 1482 and Montenegro in 1499. The misunderstandings present among the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans but also the profound schism between the Western and Eastern Christian favoured the Ottoman Turks in conquering the entire Balkan Peninsula in such a short time. In 1321 Ottoman army corps entered Thrace to help the Byzantines who were attacked by the Bulgarian-Serbian armies. In 1346 Byzantine Emperor John VI of Kantakouzenos offered his daughter Theodora to Orhan Bey in exchange for military aid against Stephan Dusan, the Serbian tsar. In 1352 Suleyman-Pasa reached the Thracian coast, occupied the Byzantine fortress of Tzympe and turned it into a bridgehead that would allow him to conquer the European territories of the Byzantine Empire. Two years later, under the pretext of helping John VI against his son-in-law John V, he conquered Gallipoli and other Thracian territories. The new conquests were transformed into feuds and given to warriors, then massively colonized with Muslim populations. Orhan's descendant, Murad I (1360-1389), reorganized the army, which

⁶ Ertuğrul (died c. 1280) was the father of Osman I. Like his son, and their descendants, Ertuğrul is often referred to as a *Ghazi*, a heroic champion fighter for the cause of Islam.

onward consisted of ordinary infantry (“yeniceri”), irregular infantry (“azapia”), regular cavalry (“spahi”) and irregular cavalry (“akingii”). He also restored conquests in the Balkan Peninsula: in 1361 Adrianople and Didymotichos were conquered, and in 1363 Philippopolis (Plovdiv) in Bulgaria. Therefore in a few years the whole of Thrace and some of Bulgaria were under Ottoman domination. In 1364 the first anti-Ottoman crusade was organized (by the Pope), attended by the King of Hungary, Louis I of Anjou, and the deserters of Bosnia and Serbia. In the battle that took place on the Marita River the Christian army was destroyed. In 1371, at Cirmen, Serbian leaders Vukasin and Ugljesa fell into battle. That year Serbian kings recognized Ottoman suzerainty. By the Treaty concluded in 1373 the Byzantine Empire did the same. In 1382 Thessaloniki was besieged, in 1383 there were incursions in Albania, and in 1384 Bosnia, Sofia, Nis and Serres were conquered. In order to stop the Ottoman offensive a Bosnian Serb-Bulgarian-Bosnian coalition was formed. It was led by Lazarus, who managed to defeat the Ottomans at Plocnik; but in 1389, in Kossovopolje, the Ottomans achieved a brilliant victory, succeeding in conquering Serbia. The new sultan Yildirim Bayezid (1389-1402) conquered Macedonia (1392), the Bulgarian Kingdom of Tarnovo and Vidin (1393) and Thessalonica (1394) and repeated the siege of Constantinople. At the insistent demands of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus and Pope Boniface IX the Central and Western European states initiated a great crusade against Yildirim Bayezid. The Christian armies, led by Sigismund of Luxembourg, were crushed on September 25th 1396 in Nicopolis. After the victory the sultan attacked Greece and Moreea, conquering new territories. His conquest campaign was stopped by the Mogul leader Timur Lenk, who defeated him in Ankara in 1402. After a period of internal political anarchy (1402-1413) the situation was restored by Mehmed I, also known as Mehmed Çelebi or Kirişçi (1413-1421), who headed for the Lower Danube region: Hungary (1415), Wallachia (1416, 1420), Moldova (1420), succeeding in conquering the danubian cities of Giurgiu, Turnu and Dobrogea. Romanian lands (Transylvania, Moldova, and Wallachia), although they recognized the Sultan's suzerainty, managed their own internal affairs. Montenegro, a country with a mountainous relief that was much too rugged and difficult to manage by the Ottomans, also enjoyed a greater independence from the Ottoman state. The commercial city of Ragusa, today's Dubrovnik, remained both de facto and de jure independent of the Ottoman state.

The descendent of Mehmet I Celebi, Murad II (1421-1451), began a new siege of Constantinople in 1422 and succeeded in bringing the Byzantine state back to being tributary (1424). In 1430 he recovered Thessaly from the Venetians and invaded Transylvania (1432, 1438). At the Pope's request a new crusade was organized under the leadership of the King of Hungary and Poland - Wladislaw Jagello - and the Transylvanian ruler - Iancu of Hunedoara, who had won a series of victories south of the

Danube in the 1443-1444 campaign. After the conquest of several Ottoman cities the Christian armies were captured by the Ottomans in Varna (November 10th 1444) and crushed.

Given that the Byzantine Empire was responsible for the crisis created in the Ottoman state, Murad II made a final attack on Constantinople. But first, he sought to return the rebellious vassals in the Balkans to obedience: in 1446 he initiated a campaign in Moreea; in 1448 and 1450 – one against Skanderbeg, and in 1448 reject suffered a blow to force to reject the attack of Iancu of Hunedoara at Kossovopolje. Mehmed II (1451-1481) conquest the Byzantium who, in order to accomplish this goal, concluded peace treaties with Hungary and Venice gaining control over the Bosphorus by building the Rumeli Hisari fortress on the European coast. After a 54-day siege (from the 6th of April to the 29th of May 1453) the Ottomans, having an army of 50,000 men, managed to enter Constantinople. Considering himself the legitimate successor of the Byzantine emperors, Mehmed II began conquering all the territories belonging to the Byzantine Empire: in 1460 Moreea was conquered, in 1463 Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1464 Albania, and in 1470 Eubee (Negroponte). The Danube became the northern border of the Ottoman Empire. The Romanian countries, beyond this natural border, were obliged to pay tribute and accept the Ottoman suzerainty. After Bayazid II (1481-1512) conquered Chilia and the White Fortress from Stephen the Great, the ruler of Moldavia, the one that succeeded in extending the conquest to Central Europe was Suleyman Kanuni (1520-1566) or Soliman the Magnificent. He conquered Belgrade in 1521 and defeated the Hungarian armies at Mohacs in 1526. After a series of conflicts with Ferdinand of Habsburg, in 1541 Buda and its surrounding lands was transformed into a “beylerbeylik”⁷. Through a new campaign, in 1543 Soliman conquered several fortresses, including Esztergom, creating Buda Beylerbeylik. Peace between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs ended on June 19th 1547 and the disappearance of the Hungarian state and its division between the two great powers was thusly legalized.

According to Geoffrey Woodward⁸, the impact of Turkish rule upon Balkan society was profound. Most of the aristocracy were killed though a minority was absorbed into the ruling class when, in keeping with Ottoman practice, the sultan took over their lands. In contrast, the peasantry (who worked the land, paid most of the taxes and were liable for military service) were treated much better than before. The peasants will be protected by the new owners of the lands and will no longer be obliged to provide the various

⁷ A beylerbeylik was a large administrative entity within the Ottoman Empire during the 15th-18th centuries.

⁸ See Geoffrey Woodward, “The Ottomans in Europe”, in *History Review* Issue 39, March 2001.

feudal services to which they had been indebted before. Apart from the frontier regions most of the Balkans was spared from the cultural and religious destruction usually associated with armies of occupation. The Christian population of the Balkans was encouraged to convert to Islam. The Ottomans practiced religious toleration and encouraged mixed marriages without forcing the population to convert. That popular freedom in choosing religion can be one of the explanations why the Balkans remained under Ottoman rule for over 400 years.

In central areas of the Balkans the Ottoman conquest brought complete change of social and political life. As a rule, the old aristocracy was removed from power almost everywhere. Nobles retained their land only in Bosnia and Albania, where they converted to Islam. In Bosnia the followers of Bogomilism⁹ had reasons for their conversion as they were equally persecuted by the Orthodox and the Catholic Church. They therefore had religious as well as material reasons for converting to Islam. In almost all areas of the Balkans the Ottomans introduced the “timar” system. This system was based on previous Byzantine practices. Just like the Byzantine Emperor was owner of all lands, in the Ottoman timar system all land was owned by the sultan who was God’s representative on earth. These lands were leased out to knight corps members, who in return undertook to provide troops in proportion to the amount of land held. Peasants worked the land and generated yields for the knights. It is worthy to remark that in the first centuries of Ottoman rule taxation and other levies were usually lighter and more regular than they had been under Christian rule. As the Ottomans never constituted a very large group, the empire's power was based on an exceptional bureaucratic and military apparatus loyal to the sultan and chosen strictly by meritocratic criteria from a multitude of ethnic groups.

Infantry troops were made of “janissaries”, an army corps made up of slaves. They were recruited from prisoners of war or bought. From the 15th to the 17th century sultans introduced a law called “blood tribes” (“devşirme”) which forced Christian villages to pay a regular tribute consisting of a number of young boys to the Ottoman Empire. These boys were taken to Constantinople, taught by Turks and converted to Islam. The smartest boys were taken to the Palace School and after graduation they were assigned administrative positions throughout the Empire. Between 1453 and 1623 Christian men of Balkan origin accounted for more than half of the great viziers - the highest administrative office in the empire - while only 10% of them were Turks by birth. One of the most noteworthy is Sokollu Mehmet Pasha, born in a family of Bosnian Christians.

⁹ Bogomilism was a Christian neo-Gnostic sect founded in the First Bulgarian Empire by the priest Bogomil during the reign of Tsar Peter I in the 10th century and it most probably arose in what is today the region of Macedonia.

Ottoman authorities seldom exerted pressure on Christians to convert to Islam, although there were fiscal and legal benefits in doing so. From an administrative point of view the empire was divided into “millets”. A “millet” consisted of a single religious confession. Religious leaders had a great responsibility concerning collection of state taxes and maintenance of order within the religious community. The most part of Balkan Christians were Orthodox. In these circumstances they were members of the millet ruled by the Greek patriarch in Constantinople. The taxes they had to pay included *devşirme*. The relationship basis between the inhabitants of different religious millets and the state was the „security pact” or “*dhimma*”. This security pact established that non-Muslims received state protection in exchange for accepting a second-class-citizen status. In the Balkans, the vast majority of non-Muslims were Orthodox Christians, alongside a significant minority of Jews and a few Roman Catholics. Unfortunately, the combination of secular and religious powers invested into the clergy led to corruption, especially at higher hierarchical levels. In the meantime, corruption became endemic. Yet the system of religious communities managed to isolate Christians from Muslims, contributing to the long-term survival of the various Balkan peoples.

The position of Jews in the empire was different from that of Christians, because the Jewish religion lacked the institutional hierarchy that existed in Christian churches. Greek-speaking Jews existed in several towns in the Byzantine Balkans. After the conquest of Constantinople the Ottoman authorities persuaded some Balkan Jews to leave their homes and move to the capital. Good merchants, the Jews dominated the commercial affairs of the Ottoman Empire from the 15th until the 17th century, when they were replaced by Armenians and Greeks. They set up large communities not only in the capital but also in Balkan cities like Thessaloniki, Edirne and Sarajevo.

Even with the relative imperial tolerance many big Balkan cities became Islamic. This happened as a result of a deliberate forced migration state policy but also because of the large number of converts to Islam. Large-scale colonization with Muslims took place on the territories that are today's Bulgaria, northern Greece and Macedonia. Most of the colonizers were nomadic tribes from Anatolia, but also Tatars or *Cerchez*s from Caucasus. Conversion to Islam provided many advantages, and many local inhabitants were converting willingly. It is noted “that certain ethnic groups, such as Albanians, Bosnians, or Vlachs were more inclined to convert than others, such as Serbs, Greeks, and Bulgarians”¹⁰. One possible explanation could be that because Albanians and Bosnians were the only Balkan peoples already divided between Orthodoxy and Catholicism they

¹⁰Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

were more willing to accept a new religion¹¹. By the 16th century Islam was already deeply rooted in the Balkan Peninsula, with 70% of Albanians and 50% of Bosnians having converted¹². Between the 15th and 17th centuries urban settlements in the Balkans became more and more Islamic. In the 15th century Muslims accounted for about 20% of the urban population; in the first half of the 16th century Muslims accounted for 40%, and at the end of the 16th century they represented 60% of the population¹³. As in any other part of the empire, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together. Although each religious community tended to isolate itself in their own slums, there were no ghettos surrounded by walls in Ottoman cities. In the most cosmopolitan cities of the Balkans mosques, synagogues and churches shared the same space.

Under Ottoman rule, the Balkan economic life was controlled by guilds. Taxes on production and commercial activities provided the bulk of the money needed for the Empire's operation. A quarter of the taxes collected in the urban areas of the Balkans during the peak of the Empire was destined for the Sultan's maintenance, while a half was used for the maintenance of senior officials in the administration. The Balkan economy brought 40% of the state's revenues¹⁴. Women from Muslim and Christian families made woollen woven fabrics in the house. In rural areas women, irrespective of religion, played a central role given that they provided the bulk of agricultural workers. In Albania and Bosnia, Muslim women in the countryside did not wear veils.

Despite some sporadic uprisings Ottoman domination over the Balkans was almost complete from the end of the 15th to the end of the 16th century. The inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula enjoyed the longest peace period. Paradoxically, peace did not bring prosperity in the long run. Economic conditions remained the same or worsened for most of the Balkan people after the end of the 16th century. An explanation could be related to the state's attitude towards economy, its main concern being stability and not economic growth. At the end of the 16th century the Ottoman Empire had expanded as much as possible, which meant that the army couldn't sustain itself. Also, at the end of the 16th century the Ottoman Empire witnessed an unprecedented demographic explosion and the underperforming economic system did not cope with an increasing population.

An effect of the decline of the Ottoman Empire's power at the end of the 16th century was significant demographic change. Greeks took

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Karl Kaser, *The Balkans and the Near East. Introduction to a Shared History*, LIT Verlag Münster, 2011, p. 228.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

advantage of the tolerant attitude of the empire and recolonized the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia. These demographic changes also included Serbs and Albanians. At the end of the 17th century Serbs revolted, encouraged by the Habsburg victories against the Ottoman Empire. They migrated from the former central regions of Serbia to the north of the Danube and embedded in a buffer zone separating the two empires.

Centuries of Ottoman rule marked the urban landscape of the Balkans as well as the everyday life of the Balkan people. The Ottomans did not just confine themselves to building mosques, but their presence was marked by public work projects: baths, orphanages, hospitals, religious schools, bridges, inns (“caravanserai”). Up until recent times those who visited almost any part of Bosnia could appreciate the specific feeling that an Ottoman city offers. Unfortunately, the post-Ottoman Balkan states deliberately chose to destroy much of the Ottoman architectural patrimony.

The influence of Ottoman rule is often viewed with hostility, especially in the Balkan world. Sometimes it is about prejudice without a real historical basis or real arguments. Often the poor economic development of the area was put on account of the Ottoman, even though the signs of economic slowdown in the Balkans were recorded long before the arrival of the Ottomans in the area. In fact, the Ottomans would have contributed to the indisputable growth of the Balkan economy by ensuring safe and secure movement of goods and people over long distances. Urban life also underwent an important development under Ottoman domination. The Ottoman administration in Southeast Europe was not a factor for regression, but - through road safety and long-distance trade - contributed significantly to the development of the area.

From a demographic point of view the Ottoman domination of the South of the Danube led to large population movements. Under the official colonization policy called “chirurgün” Turkmen populations were brought from Anatolia and established at strategic points, including in Dobrudja. The local Christian populations were instead moved to Anatolia. The Ottoman Empire favoured but did not impose the spread of Islam in the Balkans; the Turkish language was used in the army and administration but the islamization of the Balkans was not an official policy for the Ottomans.

From a cultural point of view the Ottoman heritage in the Balkans is important and we encounter it in literature, in architecture, in all languages spoken in the Balkan area and even in culinary customs.