

## Imagining the Balkans

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From the moment it was first published in 1997, Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* became an instant must-read, in particular but not only, for readers interested in the history of the 'Balkans'. Concerns about the situation in Southeast Europe at the time, in the aftermath of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, guaranteed that its impact reached beyond the specialist public. Within only a few years, the book was translated into a multiplicity of European languages (Bulgarian, Serbian, German, Romanian, Greek, Slovenian, Macedonian, Italian, Turkish, Polish, and a second updated and enlarged edition in English was published in 2009, which immediately received a French translation). *Imagining the Balkans* and the respective translations were widely reviewed. Almost 70 reviews (probably more do exist) by scholars and journalists discussed the different arguments of the book in length and detail. It very soon gained the status of a classic and it can certainly be regarded as one of the most influential books about (Southeast) European history of the past decades.

One of the main causes of the enormous interest in Maria Todorova's book is related to the extraordinary quality of the historiographical work it was based on. However, it can just as well be explained by the book's splendid style and intellectual precision. Gale Stokes, one of the first reviewers of *Imagining the Balkans*, wrote about the book and its author: 'In her book she cites sources in English, German, French, Bulgarian, Greek, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, and Russian, and perhaps some I missed. In other words, here is a person who has not only a good finger-tip feel for her native Balkans, but the training, linguistic ability, and intellectual firepower to provide a systematic and enlightening study of how the Balkans are imagined'. (1) Todorova started her academic career in the Bulgarian university system and had a series of international appointments before becoming Professor of History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2001.

The book was also a radical intervention, which was welcomed by many in the 1990s (in ‘the Balkans’ in particular, but not exclusively). It was aimed at deconstructing an emerging tendency toward new polarizations in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of state-socialist regimes in Europe. During this time of far-reaching political change, the former ideological dichotomy between ‘East’ and ‘West’ was being increasingly replaced by ‘differences’ based on long lasting ‘historical legacies’ and/or ‘culture’.

This was particularly true, as Maria Todorova highlighted, in the case of ‘the Balkans’, where the wars in Yugoslavia exacerbated these new intellectual developments. During the course of the 1990s, the Balkans were increasingly conceptualized and constructed as ‘the other’ within Europe (which had far-reaching repercussions for Western policy making in the Yugoslav wars). Maria Todorova’s key argument was that this was not a new ‘imagination’. On the contrary, as stressed on the back-cover of her book: ‘the Balkans has often served as a repository of negative characteristics upon which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the ‘European’ has been built.’ The new trend after 1989 only revived an already existing tradition; this mode of ‘othering’ ‘the Balkans’ had its origins in a specific discourse formed at the time of the Balkan wars and the First World War. However, this ‘Balkanism’ also had a gradual formative period in precedent centuries and it did not really disappear throughout much of the 20th century, receiving a new impulse in the 1990s.

The way to understand this ‘Balkanism’, argues Todorova, is to situate it within ongoing theoretical debates – above all vis-à-vis orientalism and post-colonialism. In her understanding, the evolution of an overall Balkanist discourse is much less a variant of orientalism as it is a development with quite distinct features within ‘Western’ intellectual or academic perceptions. The imagined Orient had hardly a concrete location and delimitation, was regarded as ‘non-European’, closely connected with a colonial image and past, had implicit racial connotations (‘non-white people’) and was closely associated with Islam as the religion of the ‘oriental other’. In the Balkanist discourse, as Todorova highlights, most of these aspects are missing. The Balkans was precisely located in terms of geography, it was ‘European’, had no experience of a ‘real’ colonial past, the population was ‘white’ and (around 1900) the majority of the population was ‘Christian’. Nevertheless, by the beginning of the 20th century, a hegemonic discourse, which portrayed the ‘Balkans’ as the (European) ‘cultural’ other, had become prevalent. Todorova argues that, in order to understand such a development, it is important to have a deeper understanding of the (partly long-lasting) historical processes that led to such a perception. The objective of *Imagining the Balkans* is to re-construct these processes within intellectual and political discourses.

Maria Todorova begins her argument by looking at early references of usage of the Ottoman-Turkish term ‘Balkans’, which was originally a word for a (wooded) mountain range. She clarifies that ‘Balkan’ was a term hardly used in Western and non-Ottoman sources for most of the centuries of Ottoman rule in Europe. (2) The ancient term Haemus (or Aemus or variants of this word) were predominant when European (Venetian, Habsburg, French, British etc.) travelers spoke of the mountain range, which locals referred to in Slavic as Stara planina, among others. The perception of a particular ‘Balkan region’ within the Ottoman Empire emerged relatively late and definitely not before the 19th century. In the early 19th century, the ‘Balkan peninsula’ (like the Iberian or Apennine peninsulas) appeared in scientific geographic discourse (starting with the work ‘Goea’ by the German geographer August Zeune in 1808). It took many more decades before ‘the Balkans’ became an increasingly dominant form in scholarly reference and in the new emerging and expanding fields of journalistic and quasi-journalistic literary forms, best exemplified by travelogues.

The author demonstrates how this process of expansion took place by reconstructing and commenting on the writings of educated travelers, from the 15th and 16th up to the late 19th century. In impressive style, Todorova is able to give empirically precise, clearly readable and illustrative examples of different understandings and changing perceptions of the region and the way the authors were depicting, explaining and reasoning, from sources in the Venetian, German, French, Russian or English languages. One of the

messages of these chapters is that a homogenous outlook on 'the Balkans' hardly existed before the 20th century. Todorova stresses that it is probably more appropriate to speak of separate developments and traditions in different languages, which probably can be placed into a chronological (and national) historical development and placed into the 'logic' of a certain period and time – be it renaissance, humanism, empiricism, enlightenment, classicism or romanticism. However, there was no common Western stereotype of the Balkans or the people living in 'Ottoman Europe' – or later by the end of the 19th century in the post-Ottoman (nation) states. Todorova brings this to the point in the following way: '[...] this is not to say that there were no common stereotypes but that there was no common West. In addition, even within the different national stereotypes, informed as they were by their respective political realities and political and intellectual discourses, there was a great diversity of opinion and an even greater variety of nuance. Moreover, within the whole natural spectrum of positive and negative assessments addressed to the region as a whole, one could rarely, if ever, encounter entirely disparaging or scornful judgments addressed to the regions as a whole, let alone attempts to exclude it from the fold of civilization.' (p. 115).

Nevertheless, it is exactly such a development, towards a general stigmatization of 'the Balkans', which took place around the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. When the new (post-Ottoman) nation states in Southeastern Europe entered a policy of irredentist expansion, in particular towards Macedonia, Ottoman rule face the threat of losing control of its remaining possessions in Rumelia. Particularly in Ottoman Macedonia, repeated political anarchy was the consequence of such a political constellation. Different guerilla and irredentist movements were fighting the Ottoman authorities and each other, with more or less open support from the Serbian, Greek or Bulgarian governments. Simultaneously, the Great Powers actively became involved into different scenarios of how (in the long or short run) to benefit best from a possible dissolution of the Ottoman Empire (as a whole). The 'imperialist' agenda, the dominant 'Zeitgeist' of this time, seemed to 'force' the Great Powers (but also most other European states, as well as those in Southeastern Europe) into such a policy to extend their 'country's power and influence through colonization, the use of military force, or other means'.<sup>(3)</sup> It is precisely at this time that a 'Western audience' developed its imagination of the Balkans as an uncivilized, violent and backward part of the world. This was based on a constellation of events, which brought the region to the front pages of newspapers: The May coup in 1903 in Belgrade, in which the Serbian king Alexander and his wife were murdered (and shocked the aristocracy around Europe), the outbreak of the First Balkan War, soon followed by the Second one, and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914.

It was exactly during this time around the turn of the century that the 'imperialist mission' of the Great Powers to 'civilize the world' would now also be applied to the 'Balkans'. According to European perceptions, political and cultural life in the states of the Balkans was shaped by 'unreliability, misogyny, propensity for intrigue, insincerity, opportunism, laziness, superstitiousness, lethargy, sluggishness, inefficiency, incompetent bureaucracy' (p. 119). Characteristics as 'cruelty, boorishness, instability, and unpredictability' were now depicted as being typical for the Balkans and placed against the 'concept of Europe symbolizing cleanliness, order, self-control, strength of character, sense of law, justice, and efficient administration' (p. 119). The more such a bipolar contrast began to dominate public, political, intellectual as well also academic discourses, the more the Balkans became fixed as being 'the other'.

This continued to be a strong tendency also in the following decades. For instance, although nationalism was indeed crucial to further developments in the European 'West', the Balkan nationalisms remained bound to the 'Balkanization' paradigm. The period of the Nazi-occupation of Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania is less explored in Todorova's book. However, one could add that the established discourse about 'the Balkans' might well have merged into the perverse racial worldviews and justifications for the repressive practices of the NS-led occupational regimes on the Balkans.

A certain change came with the establishment of socialism in the states of Southeastern Europe after the Second World War, when the 'cultural' polarization became increasingly overlaid or even supplanted by a new ideological one. Socialist modernization now became placed into the context of a new (ideologically framed) East-West divide. The new ideas of progress in socialism, which aimed to form a 'new man' and

'socialist working class culture', seemed to replace the dominant Balkanism. A strict bipolar systemic European East-West divide became dominant in the decades after the Second World War. One chapter of *Imagining the Balkans* is devoted to (late) Cold-War academic and intellectual discourses about a modification of such a polarized view on 'Europe'. The chapter discusses ideas developed by intellectuals from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and partly Poland about the concept of Central Europe. Todorova reconstructs the development of such a Central European idea, which roughly states that a 'Central Europe', although having become part of the socialist 'East', had over the *longue-durée* been much more shaped by its entanglements with historical processes of the 'West' than by its (weak or hardly existing) links to the 'East', not to say 'Russia'. Todorova is quite critical of these discourses, showing that such a 'myth of Central Europe', as she calls it, is closely contributing to a process of culturally 'othering' 'less civilized Easterners'. Although the Balkan regions are more or less left out in these discussions about 'Central Europe', indirectly this is also true regarding this 'not-Central European', i.e. not that much civilized region, in Europe's Southeast. In such a way, also the discussion of Central Europe is a factor in the return of 'Balkanism', which – as already addressed above – was on the way of being newly revived with the convulsion of the socialist regimes in the late 1980s and their breakdown in the 1990s.

In the chapter 'Balkans as a self-designation', Todorova deals with the problem of how an outside view about a 'Balkan culture' also found internalization in the region itself. For this purpose, Todorova analyzed several well-chosen popular 'Balkan' figures in literary traditions or discusses and selected tropes on one's own 'Balkaness' within popular or political discourses in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Albania and Romania. It becomes very clear in this excellent examination that, as Todorova concludes, 'the Balkan architects of the different self-images have been involved from the very outset in a complex and creative dynamic relationship with this [Balkanist] discourse: some were (and are) excessively self-conscious, other defiant, still other paranoid, a great many arrogant and even aggressive, but all without exception were and continue to be conscious of it' (p. 61). Without doubt, Western popular, as well as academic, image productions on 'the Balkans' is a significant influence on the ways individuals might position their 'culture' vis-à-vis an (imagined) Western-standard. However, here one could also go beyond Todorova's interpretation. The exoticizing tendencies to understand and depict, in particular, rural life (or 'culture') as 'backward' were not solely an endeavor 'from outside'. 'Modernization' projects of domestic ruling (urban) and academic elites, based on nationalist or socialist paradigms during late 19th and much of the 20th centuries, did usually also be very much bound to ideas of 'backwardness' of rural or lower class life in their own society. Here as well, a 'civilizing mission', to bring 'our peasants' or, for instance, the uneducated urban poor or certain ethnic or religious minorities (Roma, Muslims...) into modernity always accompanied state policies. In extreme cases, as in the policy of Enver Hoxha socialist in Albania, 'backwardness' should be eradicated totally, for instance by even abolish religion and forming a state-promoted atheist state. However, there is no need to look only at such extreme cases. Ethnological research is faced, also when studying its 'own (European; Western) society', with the complicated endeavor of 'writing culture'.<sup>(4)</sup> A hermeneutic of difference is always intrinsically embedded into these challenges (for instance, either by 'idealizing' peasants/rural inhabitants as the true essence and representatives of a 'culture' or by alienating them as hindering, or not having made already, the/a 'progress' to modernity). This is a dilemma, from which it is generally not easy to escape. But, Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* can and should be taken serious in being conscious of not reproducing 'stereotypes', so deeply embedded in 'writing culture' of the 'the Balkans'.

*Imagining the Balkans* finishes with a particularly fascinating chapter about how to more adequately conceptualize and write about the Ottoman legacy in the period of the transformation from the 'imperial' to the 'nation state', which, as already shown, is *the* crucial time in the crystallization of 'Balkanism'. She describes two basic tendencies in the historiographical approach to this period of imperial-national dynamics. The one refers to Ottoman rule negatively by claiming 'that it was a religiously, socially, institutionally, and even racially alien imposition on autochthonous Christian medieval societies' (p. 162). The other interpretation 'treats the Ottoman-legacy as the complex symbiosis of Turkish, Islamic, and Byzantine/Balkan traditions', based on the premise 'that several centuries of coexistence cannot but have

produced a common legacy, and that the history of the Ottoman state is the history of all its constituent populations' (p. 164). Todorova's opinion towards these poles of interpretation is a rather dynamic one, as she explains it in the following way: 'Opposed and even incompatible as they seem, they implicitly presuppose a monolithic entity that is either completely severed from the Ottoman legacy or else forming an organic part of it. ... What is essential is that these two interpretations of the Ottoman legacy are not merely possible scholarly reconstructions; they actually existed side by side throughout the Ottoman period'. (p. 166) This is a particular message of Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*: The region has to be seen always in its wider entanglements, in particular to West-European intellectual and socioeconomic formations and the ways these developments were implemented into realities of the Balkans (beginning with the Enlightenment period and even more in the 'revolutionary period' of the 19th and early 20th century these influences were paramount in understanding 'change' in the Balkans). This is a framework, which could, when looking at the interplay of the above mentioned levels, open up very promising agendas for the ways in which further research can be formulated.

All in all, Maria Todorova's book has not lost in importance in the 20 years since it was published. It was a 'must-read' when it came out and it remains so today.

## Notes

1. Gale Stokes, *HABSBURG*, H-Net list reviews, 1997/41, 10 September 1997 < <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1320> [2]> [accessed 30 September 2016]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For an informative short overview of how the Balkans can be understood within the context of the Ottoman Empire see Nathalie Clayer, 'Balkans', *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden, Boston, 2015), pp. 32–41. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/imperialism> [3]> [accessed 30 September 2016]. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley, CA, 1986). [Back to \(4\)](#)

Maria Todorova writes: This review fulfills my dream that I had stated as a motto to my preface, using the words of Theodor Adorno: 'The hope of an intellectual is not that he will have an effect on the world, but that someday, somewhere, someone will read what he wrote exactly as he wrote it'.

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[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1320>

[3] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/imperialism>