

Malcolm, Noel. *Kosovo: A Short History*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

The task which Noel Malcolm sets himself in writing his gargantuan, inaccurately named *Kosovo: A Short History* is a thankless one. So treacherous is the field of Balkan history that anyone intrepid and foolish enough to attempt to write a one-volume history of Kosovo inevitably subjects himself or herself to a torrent of critiques, propaganda, character assassinations and assorted other forms of punishment and castigation. Malcolm has valiantly tried to guard himself against the expected accusations of bias by conducting research in nearly a dozen languages, yet the unexplained absence of any consultation of Serbian archives constitutes a critical gap in his otherwise exhaustive effort.

Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that no reader will use the absence of Serbian primary sources to dismiss Malcolm's book out of hand, because it has much to offer. From the very first page, Malcolm shows admirable dexterity in cleansing the region's Augean stables of accumulated myths and half-truths. Through consultation of primary and secondary sources, Malcolm guides his reader through debates about the provenance and identity of the ancient inhabitants of the region known today as Kosovo and the causes of the collapse of the medieval Serbian kingdom. Although Malcolm proves consistently effective here, he also displays a tendency to dwell too long on some of the more esoteric theories about, for example, the prehistory of Kosovo and the Battle of Kosovo polje in 1389. As Malcolm freely admits, the exact identity of the first settlers in present-day Kosovo should have no bearing on the outcome of current disputes between Serbs and Albanians. Indeed, the raising of contested historical nationalist claims is much more likely to hinder any chance, however slim, of transforming the resolution of the conflict of Kosovo into a positive-sum negotiation. (One could argue, however, that the very fact that present-day extremists take recourse in such arguments makes it necessary to dismiss them once again.)

Malcolm, a polymath who has written in the past on a diverse number of medieval topics (and who is currently at work on a biography of Thomas Hobbes), is at his best in the chapters covering the ancient and medieval periods. His footing becomes less sure, and the pace more hurried, in the latter sections covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, one almost detects a lack of interest in the recent history of Kosovo: Malcolm spends only 42 pages covering the years since World War II. Malcolm's haste in this section occasionally leads him to the kind of generalizations and mistakes that he has tried to eliminate in the previous portions of the book.

Malcolm has been criticized for writing a history of a region without historical pedigree and for legitimizing the title of "Kosovo" for a region that has borne many different names and boundaries. Yet it is the virtue of Malcolm's exhaustive approach that the reader learns that Kosovo holds disparate meanings for various groups. Other critics have correctly remarked that Malcolm tends to minimize the traumatic effects of the Balkan Wars and the two World Wars on relations between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Yet Malcolm is right to insist that Serbs and Albanians who propose a complete separation between their two nations ignore the impact that the region has had on them. To deny the

presence of some common impact - however positive or negative - on the inhabitants of Kosovo is to commit the nationalist fallacy of pronouncing all Serbs or all Albanians to be identical. For Albanians, the division between Gegs and Tosks continues to bear great significance. As for the Serbs, one need only mention that many residents of Belgrade who swear upon the holiness of Kosovo's soil would have to be bribed actually to go there. As Malcolm makes clear, Kosovo's only period of relative prosperity was as a mining and trading center in the late medieval period. Whatever the outcome of the present conflict, Kosovo is likely to remain impoverished.

Its shortcomings notwithstanding, *Kosovo: A Short History* is the best and most recent volume of its kind available in the English language. Ideally, readers should combine it with a separate volume on the twentieth-century history of the region. Malcolm's timely volume deserves to be read and discussed by scholars and policy makers alike. As Malcolm's book - and the controversy already surrounding it - indicate, the course of history has never made it easy to reach agreement on the name, meaning and claims to the area identified today as Kosovo. Long periods of peace notwithstanding, solutions to the disputes have often been imposed only by the use of force. The fighting now occurring between Albanians and Serbs make it ever less likely that a resolution of the conflict will be found that is amenable to both sides.

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