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## A European Destiny: a review of "The Great Cauldron: a History of Southeastern Europe" by Marie-Janine Calic

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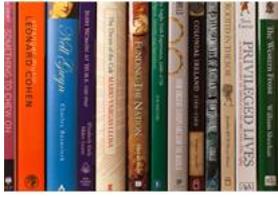
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## Dublin Review of Books

# A European Destiny

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*The Great Cauldron: A History of Southeastern Europe*, by Marie-Janine Calic, trans Elizabeth Janik. Harvard University Press, 724 pp, €39.95, ISBN 978-0674983922

Marie-Janine Calic's *The Great Cauldron* is a huge, erudite and panoramic history of southeastern Europe from late antiquity to the present day. Her use of the phrase, southeastern Europe in the title, rather than the Balkans, is an interesting and not merely a semantic point, as it highlights a central plank of the book. That phrase encapsulates an argument that says southeastern Europe is Europe – an integral part of Europe – that has shaped and been shaped by its history, and not some other place, a borderland that is only partially European.

The Balkans only became the Balkans from the late nineteenth century, a designation that brought with it connotations of otherness, non-Europe, or only sort of Europe. Before that much of southeastern Europe was simply “Turkey in Europe” or the Near East as newspapers tended to call the region. Those parts of the Balkans which were not part of Turkey in Europe were, of course, also ruled by imperial powers, either Austrian or Venetian.

While the people of the region acknowledge that it is often known as the Balkans, there is a slight distaste for the label. Balkanisation is associated with political fragmentation and irrational violence, a place of assassination and terror. I recall a taxi driver in Zagreb giving me a detailed and complex geography lesson to show that Croatia was not part of the Balkans, an argument predicated on the river Sava being the real border with the Balkans. In the end, as is the case so often in the region, the real separation was a religious one, Croatia was Catholic, while everything to the east was either Orthodox or Muslim. As the journalist and writer Misha Glenny wrote in his history of the Balkans since 1804: “If somebody displays a ‘Balkan mentality’, for example, it implies a predilection for deceit, exaggeration and unreliability. As Yugoslavia began to disintegrate in 1989, generalisations about the peoples who inhabit the region, and their histories, were spread by media organisations that had long ago outlawed such clichés when reporting from Africa, the Middle East or China. The Balkans apparently enjoy a special exemption from the rules against stereotyping.”

The people of southeastern Europe assume that everyone outside the Balkans views the region as a negative. Some years ago, while working in Bulgaria, I read to a group of university students an account of a people known for their irrational violence and terror, who were nearer to animals than real people. The account came from *Punch*. When I asked who was being described, the Balkans identified their stereotype without hesitation. No, I said, it was the Irish. They were puzzled. Most commentators still view the Balkans as a land of "ancient hatreds", including Robert Kaplan, whose book, *Balkan Ghosts*, was read by President Clinton at the height of the War in former Yugoslavia. Kaplan's basic argument was that the hatred for each other among the people of southeastern Europe was beyond any outside influence. Consequently, it is said, Clinton did not want to intervene in the war.

Other unflattering views of the Balkans include that of Agatha Christie, who invented a country called Herzoslovakia. Herzoslovakia, she wrote: "Principal rivers, unknown. Principal mountains, also unknown, but fairly numerous. Capital, Ekarest. Population, chiefly brigands. Hobby, assassinating kings and having revolutions." The country suffered from "periodic revolutions". The historian Edward Gibbon wrote in *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that Croatia and Bosnia were "still infested by tribes of barbarians." "Kosovo," Tony Blair said in April 1999, "is on the doorstep of Europe", something geographers would contest but which probably coincided with a popular view that the Balkans occupied a transitional place between well-ordered and civilised Europe and the chaos of the Orient.

Conversely, throughout *The Great Cauldron*, Calic draws attention to the interaction between southeastern Europe and the Western world. In 1776, the Comte de Choiseul-Gouffier, a future French ambassador to the Ottoman empire, visited a Greek Orthodox monastery on the island of Patmos and was asked by a local monk: "Is Voltaire still living?" In Romania, after the outbreak of the American civil war in 1861, "boyars, soldiers, priests, intellectuals and educated ladies read the translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*", finding in the campaign to abolish slavery a model for the cause of social reform at home. Likewise, Jovan Skerlic, an early twentieth century Serbian literary theorist, wrote that the choice facing his region was "either to accept western culture and live, as the Japanese have done, or to oppose it and be overrun, as has happened to the American Indians and Australian aborigines".

For much of its history the region was central to international developments and Calic is correct to begin her history from the earliest times, so that we understand southeastern Europe's place in the Roman empire, in the great religious debates, as the seat of religious dualism that spread with huge consequences to medieval France, and of the division in the Roman empire and the Christian church into Catholicism based in Rome, and Orthodoxy in Byzantium. Later, of course, Islam was added to the mix, as was Judaism.

Of major importance to Calic's thesis, that southeastern Europe was and is part of the European mainstream, is the Enlightenment. Unlike the Enlightenment in Western Europe, that in southeastern Europe was religious. Atheism, deism and anti-clericalism had no roots there. The educated elite who promoted Enlightenment values and writing were almost exclusively clerics. It was only after the French Revolution that the church recognised the subversive nature of the ideas and their power.

The Enlightenment is hugely important and whether the Balkans even experienced it is a fundamental question, because it is the start of the modern world. Western historiography would claim there was never an “authentic” enlightenment in the Balkans and if there was an intellectual development it was rather a question of how Western ideas were accepted, or were not. Calic argues that the problem with this interpretation is that it is based on the assumption that Enlightenment was a uniform phenomenon that occurred within a strict time period and was defined by radical sceptical French philosophy. Newer research, she maintains, shows a much broader spectrum, with different national, regional and confessional “enlightenments” existing within Europe and the world. No one today doubts that what we call the Scottish Enlightenment was different from the French Enlightenment, for instance.

But what becomes evident is that the desire for cultural renewal and social progress would ultimately bring the political order in the Balkans to the point of collapse. “Intellectual and cultural changes thus paved the way for the later revolutions of the 19th century,” Calic states. In other words, the growth of Balkan nationalism, the wars for independence from Ottoman Turkey, the two Balkan wars – which defined southeastern Europe as a place of savagery – were only possible because the values of the Enlightenment had been accepted, albeit in a very different form to that of France, for instance. But, as Calic argues, the Balkan Enlightenment, centred on clerical intellectuals, and national histories written by churchmen, was as legitimate as the French, the German or the Scottish. It was the “enlightened absolutism” of Catherine the Great in Russia that had a major role of spreading the new philosophical ideas among the Christians of the Ottoman empire. It was the acceptance of those Enlightenment values and what came afterwards, a growing awareness of nationalism, that makes the Balkans so distinctly European. From the Enlightenment, through the two Balkan wars to the First World War, the people of the region began to think of themselves as belonging to specific nations rather than being simply Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim, as they had been categorised under the Ottomans, religion as a marker of identity becoming a “national” phenomenon. National histories, written in the various languages of the region, helped to encourage this change, and as there were no obvious geographic and ethnic boundaries, conflict was almost inevitable. This trend was further encouraged by the role the great powers played as they circled each other, watching the void that was opening up as the power of the Ottoman empire in the Balkans declined.

In a subject this large it could be difficult to find the space for the detail, the stories that brings a narrative alive. Calic is good at describing life in Plovdiv, Dubrovnik, Zagreb, Thessaloniki or Sarajevo. She also litters her story with fascinating individuals, such as the Greek-born Croatian bishop Ivan Dominik Stratiko. After his education in Rome and Florence, he joined the Dominicans and taught philosophy and theology. He admired the works of Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau. “He was able to take certain liberties because of his fame and popularity and his success with women astonished even the Venetian Giacomo Casanova,” writes Calic.

He was also a reformer who worked to improve the lives of the impoverished people of his diocese in Croatia. As well as putting in place projects to improve their lot, he wrote against censorship, in favour of equality of the sexes, and against the Austrian Archduke Leopold. There are others, including the Greek merchant and poet Rhigas Velestinlis, whose revolutionary pamphlet called for a general uprising against Ottoman tyranny as early as 1797, or Eugenios Voulgaris, the director of the philosophy academy on the Holy Mountain of Athos and one of the most prominent proponents of the Enlightenment. The monk Paisi wrote a Slavo-Bulgarian history, the first synthesis of Bulgarian history, in his monastery library. It was hardly a scholarly work, but it was in Bulgarian, a language he championed, and might be considered a forerunner of the Bulgarian national movement.

Calic is strong on how economic activity moved from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and how, just as the region was achieving independence, it found itself, like Ireland and southern Europe, on the economic periphery.

Given her scholarship and expertise – as well as being an historian and commentator on southeastern Europe at Munich's Ludwig Maximilians University – she was an adviser to the Special Co-ordinator for the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and for the UN Special Representative for the Former Yugoslavia. She also worked for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague. Given that background, it is unlikely she would suggest that the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the subsequent war was due to ancient hatreds. It was, she says, the fault of those in charge, who ordered the demise of the federal state, who are to blame. She opposes any deterministic explanations that Balkan exceptionalism brought about the end of Yugoslavia and highlights the agency of twentieth-century modern mass society, including its media, in the politicisation of differences.

The horrors of the war in former Yugoslavia seemed to some be a return to an earlier period of violence, ethnic cleansing and mass crimes, but there were now different international actors and it was not the nineteenth century any more. Following the cessation of the war much of southeastern Europe “built democratic systems and largely normalised their relations with one another. Today, the great majority of governments share a pro-European orientation.” Since becoming members of the EU, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania have moved closer to the average per capita income of Europe as a whole, she says, not only because of EU membership but due to the conditions of accession. While acknowledging the continuing issues of identities and borders she clearly sees the future of the Balkans within the European Union and that the entire region has within it the resources to allow it to achieve accession.

This is a monumental work, taking us from Alexander the Great to the European Union, using sources from almost every European language and insisting that history should tell the story of the Balkans in its own terms rather than through the lens of former imperial powers.

Given Calic's analysis it is difficult to comprehend Emmanuel Macron's current position of opposing the start of accession talks with North Macedonia, Albania and other countries in the region. Though Macron is keen to take over the leadership of the EU, he fails to see the centrality of the EU to so many Balkan countries, and their

quest to be a real part of Europe. One wonders if he views the Balkans as a violent and irrational place full of terror and assassinations and not really part of Europe at all. Maybe he should find time read *The Great Cauldron*.

1/2/2020

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