

Preface

Can we ever hope to understand the Balkans? That is, can we ever hope to develop a serious sense of the complexities and the real issues in the history of the region and in the experience of its peoples, beyond the stereotypes that journalists and other casual and superficial observers like international relations commentators and postmodern anthropologists, tend to repeat copying for the most part each other? When I face this kind of literature my answer to the opening question is negative: we will never understand the Balkans. Occasionally, however, a respite comes that forces me to rethink and reappraise my original negative response. It does not happen very often, and it certainly does not come from reading the main volume of “scholarly” writing on the region of Southeastern Europe. My appraisal of the prospects of understanding the Balkans changes when I come across the work of a generation of historians, reaching their maturity as these lines are being written, and who are gradually building a new canon of academic literature on the region’s historical destinies –a literature through which a glimmer of substantive understanding appears possible. Dimitris Livanios belongs to this generation.

Livanios made his appearance in historical scholarship with an authoritative monograph on British diplomacy in the Macedonian Question during the critical decade of the 1940s. From diplomatic history he could have moved to some kind of commentary on current international politics in the Balkans during the subsequent Cold War and post-Cold War periods, when the region was often in the limelight and consequently it was trendy to pose as a “Balkan expert”. Instead of giving in to this temptation he turned back, to the historical sources and multiple backgrounds of modern Balkan politics and devoted his further research to two complex and decisive subjects, which are essential for understanding the Balkans, religion and nationalism. Turning back instead of coming forward to the present is the mark of a serious historian I once told him, and I think that the present collection bears this out with clarity and distinction.

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