
Regional versus National? Legacies and Prospects of the Historiography of Southeastern Europe

Diana Mishkova

The Legacy of Regionalist Historiography

In the summary of my conference paper I had stated the intention to devote its first part to a survey of the legacy and, implicitly at least, the lessons of regional history teaching and writing in Southeastern Europe. I considered that useful since I believe that our discussion on the future of regional history teaching and research has much to gain from a reflection on the accomplishments and predicaments of those who had grappled with similar endeavors before us. But since the ambition of surveying the history and the prospects of Southeast-European historiography turned out to be too farfetched for such a paper, here I shall only try to summarize the basic conclusions of my enquiry in the history of Balkan historiography.

Since the institutionalization of history during the latter half of the 19th c. and until WWII there existed a Southeast-European discourse, however, in the main, that was *not* a historiographic discourse. To the extent that it was thematised, Southeastern Europe was thought of, primarily and copiously, as a *cultural koine* rather than as a historical region. Awareness of and research into Balkan linguistic community, folklore and ethnography were the first, and for quite some time the only, areas where the idea of a Balkan historical commonality was thriving. Historiography, which after World War II would become the focal disciplinary point of Southeast-European studies, was a latecomer to the comparativist method. Tellingly, the grand regional syntheses of both Jovan Cvijić and Nicolae Iorga were inspired by the quest for common “ethno-psychological” characteristics derived from a shared historical experience and rested on the belief in culture – or a cluster of civilizational ingredients - as a binding force and principal instrument for the formation of a common regional character. The tendency of treating the history of the Southeast-European states *en bloc* was driven, as a rule, not by scholarly but by (geo)political incentives, and more often than not had originated from outside the region. With very few notable exceptions, all of which had emerged in the precarious geopolitical equilibrium and the intellectual feverishness of the interwar years¹, the Balkan historiographies remained firmly embedded in the national-history framework, and the nation remained the central concept and organizing principle of historiography. There was, at the same time, a tendency to extend national comparativism with Western Europe and suppress regional commonalities.

A significant characteristics that had marked regional historiography during the whole period since the nineteenth-century institutionalization of historical studies was the shifting and intersecting frames of sub-national - national – regional historiographies, whereby the same historians could partake in different modalities or mental representations --- nationalist as well as regionalist. The problem at issue was related to the rather complex process of

cultural self-definition and integration, and, by implication, to the relationship between national and universal history.² Thence there was no clear cut difference but a complex relationship between the national and the regional representations.

The *par excellence* “historian of Southeastern Europe” and a disciple of Karl Lamprecht, Nicolae Iorga can be referred to here as an impressive illustration of not just the parallel existence but of the actual fusion of regional and national canons. Iorga was perhaps the most prolific, learned and internationally renowned representative of the modern historiography of Southeastern Europe before World War II. He was the first regional historian to grasp the significance of the common heritage – and to plead for the study of the “great territorial entities” defined by specific historical evolution, life forms and culture. This specificity, drawing upon the great Thraco-Illyrian-Roman tradition and epitomized by Byzantium, was taken over by the Ottoman Empire and constituted the heritage, which the Balkan peoples shared. It was this heritage, Iorga implored, that made imperative the study of national history on a broader basis, which would view the various common Balkan traditions as one whole.

Iorga did not hesitate to challenge openly all those for whom “each nationality appears as individuality clearly separated from the others” and to counteract a “the prejudice that there is too little common ground between the nations in this region of Europe”. Against “the habit that everyone should confine oneself to one limited domain” and smash “small geographical and chronological drawers” he asserted the historian’s duty “to consider this whole in its totality and general lines which are more or less uniform.”³ At the same time, however, this broader regional canvas, the commonality underlying the particularities, and the history of “the great territorial entity”, in Iorga’s reading, provided the context where the pivotal place of Romania and the Romanians’ historical mission could stand out. His notion of *Byzance après Byzance* is a good example of a *sui generis* projection of the national onto the regional as well as of the belief in the universal vocation of Southeastern Europe and the role of the Romanians in the fulfillment of this vocation. The very insistence on the notion of Southeastern Europe (or the European South-East), in outspoken opposition to the Balkans and the Balkan Peninsular, in Iorga’s historiographical perspective was intended above all else to capture the integral space of “Eastern Romanity” - the “Carpato-Danubian” realm together with the Romanized inhabitants (the *Vlachs*) to the south of the Danube (i.e. in “the Balkans” proper). A crucial aspect of this “Carpato-Balkan” perspective, moreover, was the presentation of Romania as the “real” *Byzance après Byzance* – the civilizational heir of the Greco-Roman (Byzantine) Empire and “guardian of the Christian unity in a world subjugated politically to Islam”.⁴ “There was a time”, he wrote, “when it appeared that the entire Byzantine, Balkan legacy would be inherited by the Roman princes who, as the only ones who remained standing among the Christians, showed that they wanted to preserve it and that they were capable to sacrifice themselves for it ... For five hundred years we had given asylum to the whole higher religious life, to the whole cultural life of the peoples from across the Danube. The Greek Byzantine and the Slav Byzantine which derived from it had thus lived for another half millennium among us and through us, if not for us...”⁵ As these brief references to Iorga’s

own conceptual stances suggest, regional history was anything but immune to nationalist claims, and historical regions could act as a legitimating discourse or framework for nationalist projects. Iorga was neither the first nor the last to utilize transnational or imperial arguments for that kind of projects.

We should also pay attention to the hidden or the explicit agendas behind transnational regionalisms such as *Südostforschung* in pre-World War II Germany or the geo-politically driven American academic interest in the region during the Cold-War era. *Südostforschung*, to give just one example, relates to the emergence, among Austro-Hungarian and German financial and diplomatic circles, of the concept of the Balkans as an economic and political unit in the vein of ‘Drang nach Osten’. *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Orientvereines in Wien* was an organ of the circles interested in railroad-building in the Balkans; similar was the audience of *Balkan-Revue, Monatsschrift für die wirtschaftlichen Interessen des südosteuropäischen Länder* (Berlin 1914–1918).; on the eve of the Great War the *Zeitschrift für osteuropäische Geschichte* was launched in Berlin, and a seminar on the history of Southeastern Europe took off at the University of Vienna again as the result of political pressure. Similar regional visions, albeit with contradictory political agenda, were proposed by the Russian archaeological institute in Istanbul.

After World War II this whole situation changed only gradually while re-confirming some of the tendencies of the previous period. The shock of the war catalyzed some sort of enthusiasm for anti-nationalist and trans-national models, but in Eastern Europe as a whole this was very often overthrown by a dualism of ‘imperial’ or supra-national explanatory models imposed by the Soviets and a re-nationalized historiography underpinning the various national Communist projects. Academically motivated supranational visions, especially since 1970s, emerged either from the framework of the politics which they studied (empires and their legacies) or as specimen of cultural/literary or socio-economic history ⁶ – that is, to the extent that they had opened up towards disciplines with traditions in comparativism and structuralism. This tendency was of course underpinned by the global developments in the historical discipline, i.e. the culturalist turn. Historicism, hence political history, was and remained national, with scarce comparativist tradition of its own. Finally, after 1989 we can observe the dialectics of a reinvigorated (post-romantic) national(ist) historiography and a generally modernist or subversive regionalist counter-stream, although in certain cases the regional narratives are accommodated to symbolic practices of exclusion.

Constructing Balkan regionality and regional history: possibilities and limits

The last decade of the 20th century was marked by dramatic changes not only in terms of political upheaval and ideological shifts within the region. In the field of human and social sciences that period saw the upsurge of studies interrogating the categories with which regions are defined, and many disciplines, history among them, were led to re-examine the bases upon which regions are conceptualized and defended.

The answer to the question of what criteria should frame a discussion of Southeast-

European history proved to be anything but an easy one. What, if anything, is specifically Balkan about the region, what does characterize the Balkans as a coherent or meaningful unit of analysis and is able to hold its diversity together? As Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drake Francis have indicated, one possibility would be to define such history in terms of a series of shared structures and attitudes, the legacy of a common past. Historical analysis in these cases should probably proceed within the essentially political framework of empires (the Byzantine and the Ottoman), states and other administrative units obviating the need for a separate, Southeast-European unit of analysis. This is the proposal advanced by Maria Todorova who sees the Balkans in terms of its Ottoman legacy. Another option would be to envisage the region as an arena of interaction, of centuries of contact, conflict and co-existence. Until recently this approach was typified by frontier studies (exploring the character of zones united as much as divided by their boundaries). At present the methods and insights of transnational history is proving more relevant for this kind of historical research. A third approach could be to see the region as a framework for comparison, on the assumption, once endorsed by Marc Bloch, that societies that share common linguistic, political, religious, economic or historical spaces are the best subject for comparative analysis.⁷

To a great extent the choice of criteria depends on the historian's agenda and the questions whose answers (s)he will seek. And if a sense of historicity is important to attempts to define Southeastern Europe as a meso-region, a sense of diversity and conflicting patterns of culture, religion and language is no less necessary.

During the last years a more sophisticated version of the notion of "historical region" is said to have become "a constitutive instrument in the methodological toolbox" of scholars interested in a transnational and/or comparative approach.⁸ The Austrian historian Arno Strohmeyer defined the term "historical (meso)region" (*Geschichtsregion*) as "a historical-structural special category typifying terminologically a region of relative historical uniformity which can by way of historical characteristics be identified as a part of Europe with specific peculiarity".⁹ Rather than being defined by geographic borders, a region of this type constitutes an abstract and oscillating "space" whose *longue duree* features distinguish it from other historical regions (e.g. "Central Europe", "Northwestern Europe", "Western Europe"). Fernand Braudel's "Mediterranean world" is often seen as a historical region *par excellence* formed, in this case, by homogeneous climate, historical interchange and, what Braudel called, "collective destinies".

The purpose of constructing historical meso-regions is creating a framework for a transnational historical analysis of historical phenomena – a method deemed capable to visualize long-term structures which highlight the intra-regional specifics. Inherent to this concept of a region is its high degree of flexibility in terms of both "space" (or territory) and "time". Instead of defining a region in an essentialist or deterministic way, the term of a historical region is used as a virtual device and heuristic concept for comparative analysis which allows identifying common transnational structures. Furthermore, it is fluctuating in "space" and "time" and as such is subject to permanent revision. The operation of identifying

the peculiar traits becomes feasible only if intra-regional comparisons within such a constructed historical region are combined with inter-regional ones – that is across regions deemed to exhibit uncommon traits.

Despite the apparent complexity of this approach, the specific features of a given historical region are typically presented as a list of structural markers which, taken together, are said to constitute the region. Thus Holm Sundhaussen – one of the major promoters of this kind of “regionally framed” history - has singled out nine, what he calls, “clusters of characteristics”¹⁰ which, in their specific combination and high correspondence over time and space, distinguish, according to him, the Balkans from the Byzantine era to the present day. Two among them – the Byzantine-Orthodox and the Ottoman-Islamic heritage, he finds decisive for bringing about such political, economic and intellectual structures that had set the Balkans on a distinct path of development in comparison with other European regions.¹¹

Two sets of difficulties seem to stand in the way of this concept of a historical region and the attempts at conceiving a regional history. The first is “agreeing on which particular traits are decisive in marking community and demonstrating regional unity; and on how far they override political, religious or linguistic difference”.¹² The second is the tendency, quite widely spread among students of culture and political science, but also among “regionally-minded” historians, to relapse into tautological reasoning: the same traits that are chosen to “construct” the region for heuristic purposes are used later on to “prove” its specificity and unity.¹³ Historians in this sense may well appear not as “nation-builders” but as ... “region-builders”. The same holds for cultural constructions of Balkanness - of the definitions of the area in terms of (locally or externally generated) concepts of a “Balkan culture” or “cultural space”. Not only have historians vitally contributed to such discussions but notions of common culture are being usually derived from the specificities of Southeast-European history. Either way, we have to be fully aware that academic discourse both reflects and helps constitute new social realities, and that a concept of Southeast European history is susceptible to political exploitation and as such can have negative consequences.

This brings me back to the question: could we, and should we, see the regional and the national as alternative ways of studying and teaching history? To what extent should “regional studies” seek to recast our knowledge of individual national histories? These are vital questions that any discussion of regional histories should focus on and which I shall try to address here very briefly in view of the comparativist and transnational approaches.

Comparative history and cross-national history

For anyone even remotely acquainted with the history of the Balkans the benefits from using cross-cultural historiographic approaches are more than obvious. For a region which is, perhaps more than any other in Europe, marked by overlapping, intersecting, entangled historical experiences and identities, skepticism towards the traditional “national” approach to history and predilection for the genres of *Transfèrgeschichte* and *histoire croisée* are easy to understand. By challenging the nation as a paradigm for historical research and writing they

have helped to conceptualize an alternative spatial framework to the nation.

But while comparative history has rightly been criticized for mainly pursuing the analysis of different countries, thus reifying and essentializing the nation-state or the national society as the basic unit of (European) history, cross-national historians have to grapple with the place of the nation in their studies.

The tension between comparative history and cross-national history is well-known.¹⁴ But it is also, in my view, grossly overblown and in the end ineffective. My suggestion would be to see these two approaches not in opposition but relationally and dialectically. The pattern of comparisons I would commend – within the region and across historical regions - rests upon the experience of analogous phenomena while doing justice to temporal and structural differences. Such an approach should be able to accommodate, on the one hand, the contingency, constructedness and representational nature of nation- and region-making, and, on the other, the differences – political, socio-economic, and religious – that marked the infrastructures of regions as they developed historically into states and nations and which played such important roles in creating representations and visions. While transnational history encourages us to make nations the subject of interrogation and rethink their omnipotence as history-constructing units, it is also true that “the nation functions as a critical framework [whenever] nations as states exercise direct forms of power”. The very concept of “connected” or “entangled” histories implies individual histories which are distinct but connected to and in communication with each other. The study of these “connections” is not in opposition to, but part of comparative history as a way of tracing borrowings, impositions, transfers, translations.

Some conclusions

So, how to conceive of Balkan history as regional history without falling into the trap of substituting the region for the nation and reproducing the same essentialist vision on a broader scale? Several observations and provisional proposals can be made in this sense:

1. The history of Balkan historiography until now has indicated that there is no discursive and epistemological break between the national and the regional modes of representation. National and regional canons have been not alternative but interconnected. What ultimately could, and does, subvert these two frameworks is the “New History” – the expansion of historical research into new areas and subjects particularly those associated with social history or cultural history, such as the study of social groups, structures and processes; of transnational networks – diasporas, transnational elites, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities; of multiethnic nation-states; of religions, life styles, “civilizations”.

2. This also means that the approaches and concepts, capable to sustain Balkan history as a regional history cannot be the disciplinary preserve of historical analysis alone. A broad array of human and social disciplines – from literary studies to human geography, anthropology and law – needs to be involved in order to evaluate the relative importance of commonalities and cohesiveness, on the one hand, and variety and complexity, on the other.

3. It follows from the above that we should conceive of a “region” and of the Balkans not as a fact but as a heuristic instrument devised for specific analytical or pedagogical purposes, its boundaries seen as intellectual constructs - provisional, open to question and overlapping. This means continuously interrogating definitions, traits and boundaries rather than taking them for granted. It would also make possible comparative work across areas, raising issues of what levels of comparison are feasible and what differences and similarities are meaningful. In the final analysis, the viability of the Balkans as a framework of enquiry will depend on the questions we seek to investigate.

4. This also implies that we have to insist rigorously on historical context, on the ideas and structures that are relevant at a particular time, in particular circumstances, to particular people. This would prevent anachronistic reading into the past and would give us a way of thinking about specificity – by comparing Balkan phenomena with similar patterns in Northern and Western Europe; by investigating specific definitions, identities and entities, their interrelations and “survival” as historical legacies.

5. Finally, constructing regional history does not mean highlighting only what is specific or unique to a region even less its isolated investigation. Just as illuminating are comparabilities or sharedness with other historical regions of, for example, “legacies”, institutions, processes or “destinies” in the Braudelian sense. (Thus, the Byzantine and the Ottoman heritage stretched beyond the Balkans and included the whole Black Sea coastal area and the Caucasus.) In the final analysis, only comparative work within our region and across (neighboring as well as more distant) regions can bring interesting new data and viable conclusions.

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- 1 Two institutional venues that made a programmatic attempt to stimulate encompassing comparativist historical research are worthy of mentioning in this respect: the Balkan Institute in Belgrade (1934–1941) under the scholarly leadership of the linguists P. Skok and M. Budimir, who were also editors of the Institute’s journal, *Revue Internationale des Etudes Balkaniques*, and the Institute for Balkan Studies and Research, founded by the historian Victor Papacostea in Bucharest in 1937, and its journal *Balcania*. See R. Parežanin, *Za balkansko jedinstvo. Osnivanje, program i rad Balkanskog Instituta u Beogradu (1934–1941)*. Minhen, 1980; P. Skok, M. Budimir, «But et Signification des Etudes balkaniques», *Revue Internationale des Etudes Balkaniques*, I, Beograd, 1934, pp. 1–28 ; V. Papacostea, *Avant-Propos, Balcania*, I, 1938, III-VII.
 - 2 Al. Zub, *De la istoria critică la criticism (Istoriografia română la finele secolului XIX și începutul secolului XX)*. București: Editura Academiei, 1985, pp. 233–234.
 - 3 Cit. in V. Cădea, „Nicolas Iorga, historien de l’Europe du Sud-Est”, in D.M. Pippidi (ed.), *Nicolas Iorga l’homme et l’oeuvre*. Bucharest: Edition de l’Academie de la Rep. Soc. de Roumanie, 1972, p. 189.
 - 4 N. Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance. Continuation de l’Histoire de la vie byzantine*. Bucarest: Edition de l’Institut d’études byzantines, 1935.
 - 5 N. Iorga, «Necesitatea studiului istoriei statelor balcanice», in N. Iorga, *Generalități cu privire la studiile istorice* (IV ed.). Iași: Polirom, 1999, pp. 123, 125.
 - 6 After the war the area was redefined in terms of “periphery”, whereby the spacial alternative to national history became the binary opposition “core-periphery”. Remarkably, that was the prevailing Cold-War

- western perspective to the region. Attempts at cultural-historical synthesis were made by specialists in the traditions of Humanism and the Enlightenment like Alexandru Duțu and Paschalis Kitromilides.
- 7 W. Bracewell and A. Drace-Francis, "South-Eastern Europe: History, Concepts, Boundaries", *Balkanologie* 3 (2), 1999, (47–66), 52–53.
 - 8 Stefan Troebst, "Introduction: What's in a Historical Region? A Teutonic Perspective", *European Review of History*, vol. 10/2, 2003, (173–188), 176.
 - 9 Cit. in *ibid.*, 177.
 - 10 These are: 1) the instability of population relations and ethnic mix in a very small space; 2) the less and late reception of the heritage of antiquity; 3) the Byzantine-Orthodox heritage; 4) a fundamental anti-western disposition and a cultural distancing from Central and Western Europe; 5) the Ottoman-Islamic heritage; 6) social and economic 'backwardness' in the modern period; 7) pattern of nation-building; 8) mentalities and myths; 9) the Balkans as an object in the policy of the great powers. See H. Sundhaussen, "Europa balkanica. Der Balcan als historischer Raum Europas", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 25 (1999), 4, 626–653.
 - 11 Sundhaussen applies the concept of a Balkan "historical region" only to the countries that had experienced this double heritage; countries such as Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Moldavia that have had a shorter and less intensive (or none) Ottoman and Islamic influence constitute, together with the Balkans, the wider Southeastern Europe. (H. Sundhaussen, "Was ist Südosteuropa und warum beschäftigen wir und (nicht) damit?", *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 42/5–6 (2002), 93–105.
 - 12 W. Bracewell and A. Drace-Francis, *op. cit.*, 54.
 - 13 Pamela Ballinger, "Definitional Dilemmas: Southeastern Europe as "Culture Area"?", *Balkanologie* 3 (2), 1999, (73–91), 90–91.
 - 14 The transnational perspective - as espoused by transfer history, entangled history, *histoire croisée* - explores phenomena in terms of processes of mutual influencing, reciprocal or asymmetric interaction, in entangled processes of constituting one another. The comparative perspective would instead break the continuities and the entanglements - the wholeness of this total history - into separate units (distinct national cases) in order to analyze and compare them and explain similarities and differences.