

An aerial photograph of a city, likely in the Balkans, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous buildings, a prominent church spire, and distant hills under a clear sky. The image is in a monochromatic blue tone.

# OUTCAST EUROPE: THE BALKANS, 1789-1989

From the Ottomans to Milošević  
Tom Gallagher

# Outcast Europe



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THE BALKANS, 1789–1989  
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## PREFACE

The idea for a book of this kind first occurred to me at the end of November 1992. I was in the audience at a rally of Britain's European movement in Edinburgh. It coincided with the summit of the European Union's Council of Ministers being held in the city during the fateful second half of that year when Britain held the EU Presidency.

With the USA absorbed in its year-long presidential election, Russia grappling with its retreat from communism, Germany fast retreating from Balkan involvements, and France and Italy disinclined to adopt a high profile as war raged in parts of Yugoslavia, Britain had been shaping international policy towards the region. John Major's government had adopted a minimalist policy towards the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, emphasising humanitarian relief but refusing to promote active peace-making measures which could end the tidal flow of refugees. The siege of its capital, Sarajevo, was well into its second year and mixed communities across Bosnia were being broken up by systematic violence as Serbian and then Croatian nationalists tried to create an ethnic monopoly in order to divide the territory between the nationalist regimes installed in Belgrade and Zagreb.

Statements from British government figures, briefed by Foreign Office officials, made it clear that the conflict was seen as based on the 'normal' Balkan pattern of life in which 'ancient ethnic hatreds' predominated. What I did not expect to hear at the Edinburgh rally was this view being endorsed by one of its keynote speakers, Edward Heath, who secured Britain's entry into the European Union in 1973 when he was Prime Minister. Ted Heath, as he is known by voters and fellow politicians alike, has remained true to the idea of creating a politically unified Western Europe. At the age of 85, he retired from parliament where he had long criticised his party, the Conservatives, for moving in an increasingly nationalist and 'Euro sceptic' direction. He began his long political career in the late 1930s as an undergraduate student at Oxford University, where he vigorously opposed the policies of appeasement of Neville Chamberlain towards Hitler in Central Europe.

But it was clear from listening to Ted Heath on that cold and bright Scottish winter afternoon, as he reaffirmed the need for European unity, that there was little place in his vision for the Yugoslav lands and that he did not even regard them as part of the Europe whose unification had become his lifelong ambition. When I protested from the floor about the

injustice and narrowness of such a view, he was unmoved. I would have been ejected from the meeting, but for the intervention of another speaker on the platform.

Shirley Williams, Professor of Government at Harvard University, had been the most enthusiastic pro-European member of the British Labour government of 1974–76. She gently pointed out to Ted Heath that his definition of Europe was too restrictive and that in order to succeed, the post-nationalist project in Europe had to encompass all its parts. She has since shown her commitment to integrating the Balkans with the rest of Europe by promoting various projects, especially in the area of civil society.

The argument about whether to ‘ring-fence’ the Balkans by containing its problems through minimal engagement or whether to recognise that problems with minorities and conflicting borders are ones that western Europe and even the USA had in abundance until recently, and that those who have overcome them should help the Balkans to do the same, flared periodically in the West during the 1990s.

With NATO’s military action in Kosovo in 1999, victory appeared to go to the interventionists. But the dismal performance of organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Kosovo suggests that Western policy-makers are still reluctant to act as organizers, leaders and peace-makers in the region, empowering civic-minded forces and isolating intransigent ones. International officials are still imbued with a deep sense of fatalism about the ability of local elites and their populations to aspire to good government and modern forms of conduct. There is still plenty of evidence that the problems of the Balkans are seen as culturally determined and historically recurring and therefore beyond capable solution.

This book explores the origins of such negative attitudes towards the Balkan region. It argues that an appropriate and relatively neglected paradigm in which to explore the problems of the region is the international one. It argues that the politics of ethnicity and the economics of dependence which are the paradigms through which the contemporary Balkans are normally viewed, have acquired their intensity from unfavourable international pressures consistently applied to the region.

A shifting cast of international powers have sought to exercise hegemony, or else exercise long-term influence over the region since it became recognised as a distinctive zone of Europe in the early 19th



century. An unfavourable geographical position means that the peoples of the Balkans have been poorly placed to resist such intrusions. For millennia the region has been a transitional zone where rising civilizations and competing social systems met and often collided. The powers have usually not behaved in a measured or consistent way towards the region. The durability of stereotypical attitudes held in metropolitan capitals about its inhabitants means that policies have been erratic and subject to great fluctuations. Both Western Europe and Russia have behaved in a predatory or neglectful way towards the region at different times, which has increased the local sense of insecurity.

Thus new and aspiring states in the region often acquired a sense of profound insecurity because of the unstable international environment in which the Balkans existed. It is not surprising that competing ethnic movements and national states behaved in an aggressive and vindictive way towards each other during the long era extending for a century and a half after 1789, when nationalism was the excuse for frequent wars in Western Europe as well as imperial expansion across the whole of the non-European world.

This book examines the interaction of internal and external events in the Balkans, particularly the rise of the nation-state based on a single ethnic identity, rivalry among the great powers, and the emergence of fascism and communism in shaping the politics and the economic development of the region. It looks in turn at how local crises, often having their origins beyond the region, sometimes spilled over into the rest of Europe, destabilising continental politics, most notably before the First World War. Political analysis predominates but economic, social, cultural and intellectual developments figure prominently in the narrative where they contribute to an understanding of several of the major questions which the book is exploring.

Much of the book has been written during the 1999 Kosovo crisis and its aftermath when the territory's main ethnic grouping, the Albanians, have been widely viewed first as helpless victims of state violence then as revenge-seeking aggressors, driving the Serbs, the Roma gypsies, and Muslim Slavs from their homes.

The sudden and drastic change in the respective fortunes of the groups competing for Kosovo is a familiar occurrence in the modern history of the region. Regimes have fallen, the size of states has shrunk or expanded, and populations have been moved or resettled more often, and with less warning, than elsewhere in Europe. Periodic upheavals

have retarded economic development and weakened the growth of local institutions capable of ensuring the progress that has been registered in other parts of Europe.

It is easy to forget that Western Europe's history has been extremely violent. But, despite periodic wars, strong states had guaranteed a century of relative stability and material progress by the time Balkan conflicts erupted in 1912 over the fate of territory previously occupied by the Ottoman Empire as its retreat from Europe gathered pace. Early newsreels and foreign correspondents for the mass circulation press portrayed scenes of cruelty visited upon often defenceless civilians. The Balkans was on its way to acquiring one of the most negative images in world politics. Today, whenever a country, usually with a variety of ethnic groups, trembles on the brink of collapse as Indonesia seemed to do in 1999, ominous headlines warning that 'Balkanization' appears to be its unenviable fate, are hard to avoid.

This study acknowledges that much Balkan unrest has both external and local origins. The French revolution began the process of sweeping away the multicultural traditions of a region in which religion and attachment to a locality where the main badges of identity, gradually replacing them with the belief that a group feeling itself to be a nation deserved a territory of its own. Enormous suffering ensued as recurring efforts were made to establish a national monopoly on territory shared with other groups.

But foreign powers were rarely idle bystanders. The main claim which is investigated here is that continuous external interference in the affairs of the region exacerbated local disputes over territory, giving them a value which they might not otherwise have had. The unavoidably painful process of nation-building might have been less destructive if the Balkans had not become a playground for the powers to pursue their rivalries, and more compact and better-governed states might well have emerged. Thus the Balkan peoples have paid a heavy price for being located in one of the world's most sensitive geopolitical areas.

European powers have risen and fallen in the century or more since Balkan crises started making headlines. In the last fifty years, the United States has become an increasingly important force in the region. But there is remarkable consistency in the way that empires concerned to defend their global interests, competing European dynasties, Nazi and communist dictatorships, American Cold War warriors, and even European social democrats have shaped their Balkan policies.

One explanation is that rulers and their diplomatic advisers have often become prisoners of the unfortunate stereotypes which the region has acquired. The hold of such stereotypes explains why mediocre and short-term policies have been retained for a lengthy historical period. Much evidence to back up such a claim is presented in the succeeding pages.

It was originally intended to include the period 1989–99 in the narrative. The four wars fought in the former Yugoslavia, as well as increasing contact with Balkan states hoping to join the community of Euro-Atlantic democracies, have resulted in an unprecedented degree of interest in, and engagement with, the politics of the region. Many familiar mistakes were committed by statesmen and diplomats. But a few promising new approaches were adopted that offer the possibility of the Balkan peoples finding their rightful place in a united and peaceful Europe. This will only happen, I believe, if the best citizens of the region, in parties committed to inter-ethnic cooperation, in a range of local civic groups, and in everyday occupations are assisted to devise a new policy-making framework in which economic cooperation across ethnic and territorial boundaries becomes the priority for development. The performance of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe nearly one year after it was founded in June 1999, suggests that this lesson is only very slowly being learned.

Anyway, examination of the Balkan crises of the 1990s and the role of external and local actors will have to await a planned second volume. This second volume will examine how unresolved conflicts of nationality continue to impede the modernisation of Balkan societies and estimate how damaging or constructive has been the impact of external forces, not just global or regional powers, but transnational organisations, influential opinion-formers, and even émigré groups.

This is essentially a study of the interplay between nationalism and foreign intervention in the Balkans over a two-hundred-year period. Some readers may detect an undue emphasis on particular countries at specific periods. Romania, for example, figures prominently in the second half of the book. This is so because a number of key episodes in the country's turbulent 120 years of statehood illustrate particularly well the manner of external intervention in the politics of the region and domestic responses to it.

Aspects of Yugoslav history, particularly certain Second World War events, may appear to have been lightly dealt with. This is because, in the second volume, some of the historical roots of the post-1991

conflicts will be explored in detail and limitations of space rule out duplication.

Countries like Croatia and Slovenia, part of a larger mainly South Slav state entity until 1991, receive far less attention than Greece or Albania. More attention is paid to Greece between 1945 and 1974 than in later or earlier periods. Greece's inclusion is necessary because, except for the period of non-communist rule after 1945, it faced many of the challenges of its northern neighbours and many Greeks believed themselves to be part of a common Balkan space. Indeed Greek public opinion and politicians are more at ease with a Balkan identity than are many citizens in northern parts of Romania and what was Yugoslavia, who are drawn to a Central European orientation.

Perhaps one of the most contentious aspects of the book is the inclusion of Cyprus. This disputed territory is not part of the Balkan peninsula but it is definitely part of Southeast Europe and remains a key bone of contention between two of the main players in Balkan politics: Greece and Turkey. The intensity of the Cyprus question between 1950 and 1974 highlights several of the themes of the book, particularly regarding foreign intervention, and this was sufficient reason for me to include it; indeed, it was uncanny to see the way that at key moments of the post-1991 Yugoslav crisis, Britain and the USA would repeat basic errors which helped to make the Cyprus question such an intractable one in the third quarter of the last century.

The book also shows that there was considerable continuity between Russian tsarist policies towards much of the region and those of their Soviet communist successors.

Chapter one begins with the pre-nationalist Balkan world which endured in many strata of society even as new states were formed after 1800. It examines: the historic events which shaped the ethnic composition of the region; the multicultural traditions whose roots were strengthened in Ottoman times when in Western Europe the emphasis was on religious and cultural uniformity; the growing appeal of nationalism for small but well-placed groups alienated from decaying Ottoman rule and sometimes inspired by modernising Western states; and the intervention of external powers, Britain and Russia, later France, Austria and Germany, in the affairs of the region.

Foreign intervention, it is argued, though occasionally enlightened because of the influence of liberal public opinion, had profoundly negative results. Suspicious and narrow-minded powers carved up the region in to spheres of influence. The 1878 Congress of Berlin rejected

the creation of a small number of states, frustrating national movements and states which then resorted to terrorism and arms races.

Representative government brought disappointing results and was often limited in scope for countries whose borders had been arbitrarily carved out by the powers. Urban development was usually pursued at the expense of peasant welfare by insecure elites. Nationalism shaped the policies and priorities of the Balkan states but, usually, it was unable to inspire them to material endeavour. Great power meddling and the growing assertiveness of new states would result in escalating regional confrontations whose outcome was the First World War.

Chapter two examines the post-imperial era of Balkan national states which began in 1918 and had ended by 1940. It proved to be a shortlived experiment before a fresh European war and the totalitarian ideologies of fascism and communism combined to sweep away the region's fragile political institutions.

Criticism of the governing style of the Balkan monarchies and their priorities is provided by focusing on their treatment of minorities and the peasantry, as well as their policies towards neighbouring states. But the failure of Britain and France to use their primacy after 1918 to reshape the European order along lines that would make it far less easy for conflicts of nationality to burst to the surface, contributed far more to the failure of the inter-war order baptised at Versailles in 1919–20. The Allied states failed to promote a policy of collective security to promote economic cooperation and safeguard minorities, even though they were warned in 1919 that a Europe based on the self-determination of nation-states would not prove stable or long-lasting otherwise.

Despite the origins of the 1914–18 war in the Balkans, Britain and France continued to neglect the politics of the region. Britain's policy towards the region increasingly reverted to defence of her strategic and economic interests further east. Aggressively revisionist states profited from the confusion of the major democracies. In the 1930s Britain and France were prepared to deal directly with the dictators at a time when the Balkan states were making energetic efforts to step up their cooperation and stay out of a new European war. This chapter shows how stereotypical attitudes towards the Balkan region and its peoples hardened in Western capitals. An unfavourable geographical position, Western miscalculations and cynicism, and failures of governance made it impossible for the Balkans to stay out of a conflict which crystallised around a struggle for power between Germany and the Soviet Union. National independence was based on shallow roots and the adherence

of elites and educated public opinion to narrow nationalism simply increased the vulnerability of Southeast Europe to major upsets in international relations.

Chapter three covers only the years from 1941 to 1948, but this was a turning point in modern European history in which nearly all the Balkan states fell under Soviet Russian control. Britain and the USA (after 1941) were required to pay more attention to Eastern Europe than ever before. Churchill and Roosevelt's alliance with Stalin meant that momentous decisions were made about the future size and status of countries occupied by Hitler, from Poland to Greece.

The chapter contends that in a war fought by the Atlantic democracies to restore freedom, Western leaders in the end were prepared to allow a new tyranny to descend on Eastern Europe. They lacked an empathy with the peoples of the region, especially the Balkans, which would have been necessary to check a new wave of aggression. They failed to devise a political strategy for Eastern Europe beyond a brief flirtation in Britain with federal solutions and frittered away the advantages which they still possessed there. Stalin, who most probably lacked a plan for gaining control of the region in the early 1940s, took full advantage of the irresolution of his Western Allies. Britain, in particular, was prepared to trade territory and allocate spheres of influence in the Balkans in order to shore up its important interests in the Middle East. The Cold War over how far into Europe Soviet domination could extend had broken out by 1948. In the end, it was rebellious communists in Yugoslavia who placed a decisive check on Soviet power. But the partition of Europe which lasted for nearly fifty years took place along a boundary which was already a deep psychological one in the minds of powerful Western politicians and diplomats, above all where Europe's Southeast was concerned.

Chapter four examines the impact of Soviet domination on the Balkans between 1949 and 1974. It shows how communist rule had a more destructive impact on Balkan economies and political standards than was the case in East-Central Europe. It examines the phenomenon of national communism which emerged in the 1960s and how, in many ways, it worsened the predicament of Balkan states. It also monitors the unique Yugoslav experiment in decentralized communism, indicating the tensions and incoherence which prevented it sinking effective roots in a still-fragmented land.

This chapter shows how attempts to move out of the Kremlin's orbit engendered much wishful thinking among the Western powers which

periodically behaved with stunning lack of foresight in their own Southeast European bailiwicks: Greece and Cyprus.

Chapter Five explains why interests hostile to pluralist reform became increasingly influential in most of the communist Balkan states as the end of the Cold War approached. Xenophobic nationalism was promoted through the state media and educational system. Rigid controls on free speech and personal liberties prevented any effective challenges to communist rule except on a nationalist basis. However, the Balkans continued to be seen as peripheral to the interests of the Atlantic democracies and Western indifference played a major indirect role in strengthening the position of nationalist hardliners in Yugoslavia. The scene was set for nationalist agendas to dominate the post-communist era, which witnessed a fresh cycle of miscalculations by the major powers that dwarfed those seen in earlier periods.

I thank all the people who contributed to the making of this book.

Over many years John Horton, the Social Science Librarian at Bradford University has built up a large collection on Southeast Europe which made it an ideal research base. He always responded to requests for locating material on a wide range of subjects. Thanks are also due to the inter-library loan staff at Bradford for obtaining dozens of items while research and writing was in progress; and to Stewart Davidson for arranging the maps at the beginning of the book.

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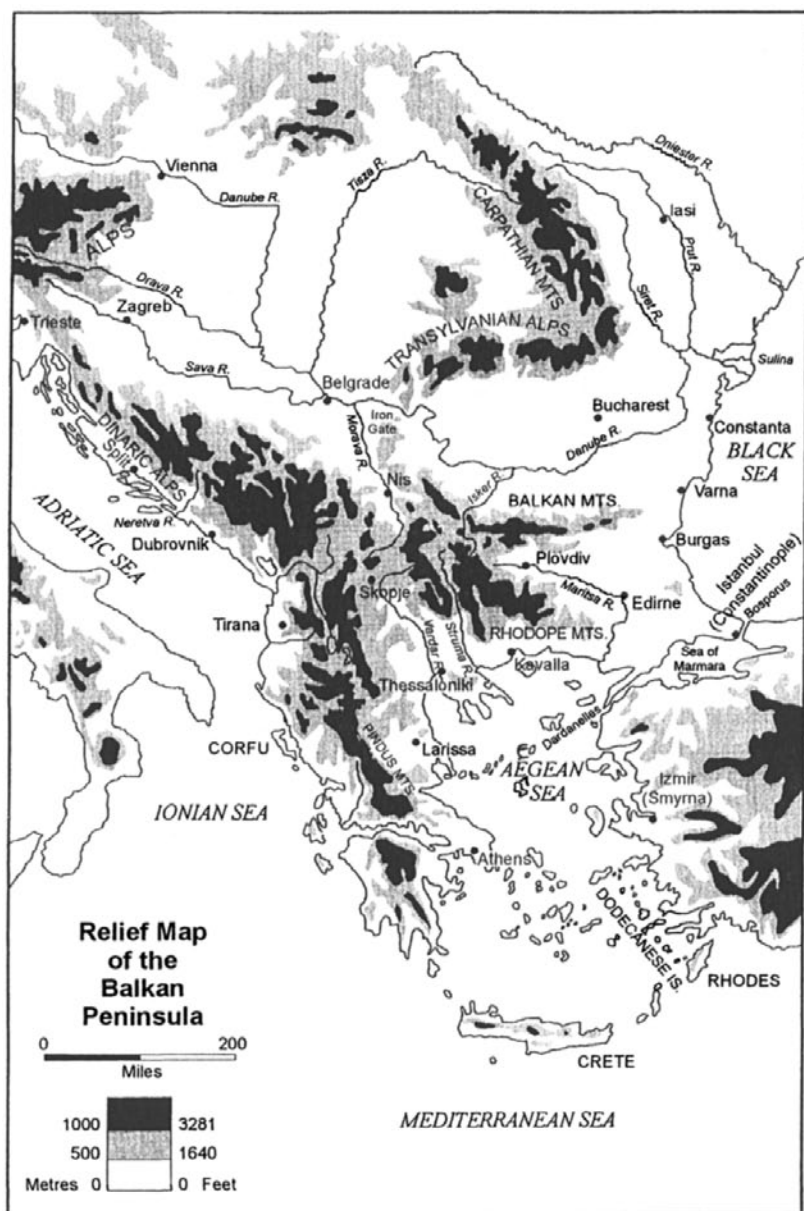
As the guest of Smaranda Enache and Elok Szokoly on several occasions at events organized by the Liga Pro Europa in Tirgu Mures, I was able to admire their work in combating ethnic prejudice, especially among the young. I will always recall a marvellous week spent as their guest at the Transylvanian Intercultural Academy in Sovata during July 1998.

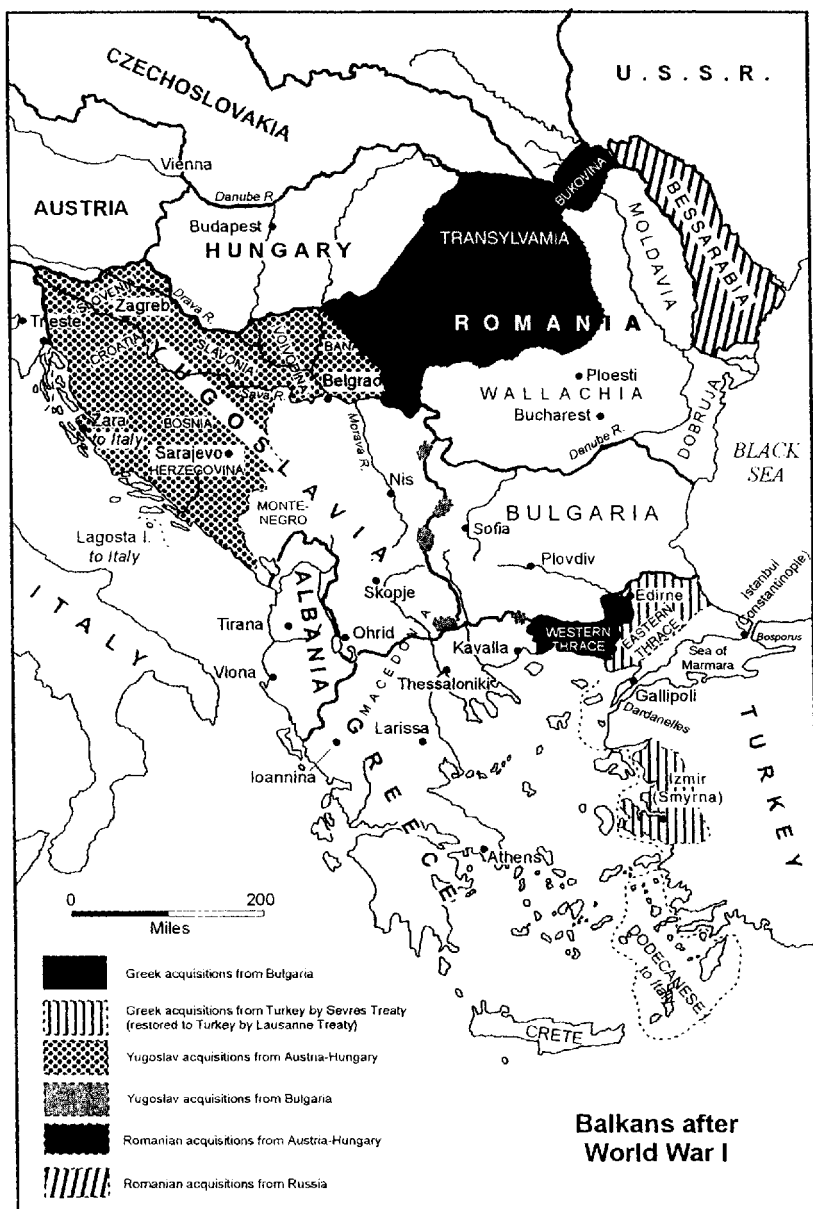
Lastly, warm thanks are due to the reader of this book, Robert Bideleux, who, in the midst of pressing tasks, including the completion of a new history of the Balkans, made many constructive suggestions and saved me from not a few elementary errors.



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# Introduction

## ON BEING BALKAN

Analysis of the Balkan wars of this decade has for too long been characterized by simplistic generalisations and sweeping judgments about the character and mentality of entire peoples, generalisations that would hardly be accepted anywhere else in the world.

Sérgio Vieira de Mello, United Nations chief spokesman on Kosovo 1998–99,  
*International Herald Tribune*, 25 August 1998

### THE BALKANS: A ZONE OF TROUBLES

The Balkans is seen as a permanently disturbed region on the margins of Europe. Real doubt exists about whether it belongs to Europe at all. During the war in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, British leaders were often heard to say that 'Europe' was doing its best to solve a perennial problem; such language betrayed an unconscious feeling that the region and perhaps most of its inhabitants were alien intrusions on the European landmass.

In the 1990s there has been no shortage of violent and dramatic happenings to suggest that the chaotic and unruly image long ago acquired by the countries of the Balkan peninsula is a deserved one: four separate wars have been waged in different parts of what was once the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the 1990s; mass unrest has threatened public order in Albania with collapse on different occasions; of all the East European countries, it was Romania, straddling the cultural divide between Central and Eastern Europe, which saw the collapse of communism assume its bloodiest form; Greece, the one country fully in the Balkans to escape communist rule, was widely seen during the ascendancy of its left nationalist Premier Andreas Papandreu as representing Balkan intransigence in some of its most troublesome forms; only Bulgaria has avoided headline grabbing upheavals, which is ironic given the country's proverbial turbulence before 1945 and the fact that the mountain range which has given the name to the entire peninsula of Southeastern Europe is to be found within its borders.

In the 1990s the power of satellite television to transmit across the planet distressing images of conflict and suffering from the Balkans has implanted a negative stereotype in perhaps a majority of the world's

inhabitants who have a glancing knowledge of international affairs. 'Balkanization' is now one of the most negative paradigms in international relations. Since the First World War the term has been in use to describe the fragmentation arising from arbitrary and unpredictable behaviour involving the division of states and conflict between them.

Maria Todorova has pointed out that the pre-1914 turmoil in the Balkans was enormously important in popularising its negative image (Todorova 1997: 118–19). But, as she reminds us, the attempt to create ethnically homogeneous states which was at the root of much of the organized violence, fitted in well with developments in Western Europe over a much longer historical time-frame. Western Europe was no stranger to the organized violence, which had led to the creation of relatively compact states and which was far from exhausted as the Holocaust of the Jews would make clear. It was Bulgaria which, more than any other country in the 1940–44 years, took determined steps to shelter its Jewish population, a fact which is barely known beyond that country's borders.

Periods of calm in the region don't make headlines or else are characterised by roving reporters as harbingers of storms ahead. It is forgotten that Balkan states cooperated in the 1930s when the rest of Europe was plunging headlong towards war; indeed for the 1938 tourist season, the Balkans was promoted as Europe's 'Peace Peninsula' (Bruce Lockhart 1938: 134). In our own day, it is easily overlooked that all of war-torn Yugoslavia's neighbours made tenacious and successful efforts in the 1990s to prevent the Yugoslav wars spilling across their borders; and that Yugoslavia had enjoyed forty years of peace in the middle of the last century, and that the mix of religions and nationalities suggested older traditions of mutual co-existence.

This study does not deny the fact that much Balkan strife is local in origin, arising from attempts to build nation-states on ethnically mixed territory. But it will seek to show that continuous external interference in the affairs of the region exacerbated local disputes over citizenship and statehood, giving them a value and intensity which they might otherwise not have had. It will survey the negative impact of long periods of direct rule by imperial powers on the region, the last phase of external overlordship, promoted by the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1989, perhaps having the most destructive effect of all on interstate relations as well as human relations between citizens sharing different ethnic identities belonging to the same state. It will also examine the often calamitous impact that competition between rival powers, active

in the region, has had on the capacity of Balkan peoples striving to modernise their societies and create representative forms of government.

Indeed I suggest that if there is one principal explanation for the negative image suffered by the states comprising the Balkan peninsula, it arises from the difficult relations which the West and Russia have had with the region for a century or more. More than once the interests of the major powers collided in a strategically placed region which the expanding empires of Russia and Great Britain, as well as lesser powers like Austria-Hungary and France, regarded as vital for their security.

It is not surprising that intransigent expressions of political nationalism periodically flared up as a response to outside interference. The appeal of local nationalism made it difficult for the powers to subjugate the Balkans in the way that they managed to do in the larger expanses of Central Asia and Africa. Ambitious British, German and Russian leaders from David Lloyd-George to Hitler, Stalin and Khrushchev were often frustrated by stubborn local leaders like Kemal Atatürk, Josip Tito, and Enver Hoxha who mobilised nationalist sentiment to repel external power-grabs.

The Crimean War and the First World War were two international conflicts which had their formal origins in the Balkans. Lesser conflicts of terrible intensity such as the 1912–13 Balkan wars and the wars of the Yugoslav succession in the 1990s gave the region an unenviable reputation for pursuing internecine differences with peculiar ferocity. But I argue that at several key moments the behaviour of powerful external states, whether through creating unjust or unviable political solutions or else by supporting authoritarian leaders with a deeply conflictual approach to politics, made violence on this scale hard to avoid.

Contending European powers often managed to preserve a shaky balance of power by creating hastily arranged compromises that ignored the aspirations of the Balkans and intensified old disputes or else laid the basis for new ones. When foiled ambitions and ruined careers resulted from mishandling the Balkans, the region and its peoples were often damned in the metropoli of the West and later in the Kremlin. In describing the Balkan peoples and their leaders, the language used by Hitler in *Mein Kampf* and by the head of the British Foreign Office in the diary he kept in the 1940s was not dissimilar.

The Balkans did provide undeniable challenges for European politics and continue to do so. How to create political arrangements that will reconcile the desire for self-rule among peoples who often do not live in contiguous neighbourhoods and can be at loggerheads with others over



the same territory is a challenge for Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup>.

The behaviour of local leaders could be exasperating. But the primacy of nationalism can be too easily exaggerated by superficial commentators searching for a convenient label to explain a region whose politics do not fit into the patterns familiar to Middle America or Middle England. One of the main arguments of this book is that extreme forms of nationalism flared up more often in response to gross interference by external powers and that the same pressures might well have produced similar reactions in countries whose geography has bequeathed them a more settled history.

When the powers intervened in the Balkans, either individually or in concert, the needs of local inhabitants were rarely at the top of their list of priorities. They were usually pursuing policies that would advance their own imperial or national interests or prevent their rivalries spinning out of control. Often these goals were achieved at the expense of the inhabitants, even in places where there was a local consensus about what their political destiny should be.

Balkan territory was often divided up to satisfy the balance of power between large states which felt they had a legitimate stake in the region. The most notable example was the 1878 Treaty of Berlin which helped to create the Macedonian and Bosnian questions that had ominous consequences for the peace of Europe. This and other Western- and Russian-sponsored map changes left unsatisfied state nationalisms and rebellious minorities. There was little enthusiasm for creating large states which could fill the vacuum left by retreating empires or promoting a Balkan confederation. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century such arrangements could have marginalised nationalism at a time when it was a belief system with relatively little influence on the masses who retained a local identity.

Flimsy knowledge often lay behind decisions taken in the Balkans by influential outsiders, which could have momentous consequences later. It is not unusual for statesmen and their advisers to make hasty decisions about the inhabitants of what are seen as peripheral regions which may return to haunt them later on. The place of remote peoples in the geopolitical hierarchy of nations is often assigned on the basis of patchy knowledge. The quality of advice given to ministers by diplomats based in the Balkans has often been unreliable. The Balkan capitals have usually not been a top-rank posting; that remains the case today even when Southeast European issues ranging from Cyprus to the future of

disputed territories like Kosovo and Bosnia are among the biggest security challenges for Western leaders.

Obsolete policies towards the region have often been retained when perhaps it should have been clear that political conditions justifying them had altered. A limited attention span and the unwillingness to devote energy, imagination and, if necessary, resources to overcome a problem are other long-term features of the European powers' engagement with a 'problem' region.

When policies fail, sometimes in a spectacular fashion, there has been a tendency to blame local factors rather than trace the cause to defects in the behaviour of the metropolitan powers. There is no shortage of excuses deriving from the failings of the Balkans and its peoples.

The most influential explanation for Balkan instability in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that it rests on 'ancient ethnic hatreds' that burst to the surface periodically and with terrifying force. These bouts of tribal warfare are seen as culturally determined and historically recurring and therefore beyond capable solution. Many are the journalists, diplomats and policymakers who subscribe to such a view of the Balkans. Other once troublesome people, whose behaviour was supposedly shaped by ending cultural characteristics, have been categorised in not dissimilar ways by metropolitan commentators. In the past, the Spanish, the Irish, the Argentinians, and the Iranians have been among the peoples whose culture and history apparently rendered them incapable of modernising their societies and developing effective political institutions. It is perhaps no coincidence that unflattering and bleak accounts of their potentiality to advance have coincided with periods when leaders in these countries have confronted powerful states like Britain and the USA whose ability to shape news values gives them an important lever on the world stage.

Before the 1999 Kosovo War, Western governments were averse to acting as organizers or peacemakers in the Balkans, perhaps because they were imbued with a sense of fatalism about the willingness of local elites and their populations to benefit from such assistance.

Instead a policy of containment, preventing Balkan quarrels from destabilising adjacent regions, has been preferred. Such a minimalist approach has often resulted in deeply repressive forces prevailing, as happened in Bosnia during the 1992–95 war. But Balkan exceptionalism still permits statesmen to impose hurried settlements which violate basic tenets of democracy, ones which they would usually hesitate to impose on their own countries.

A consistently held feature of international intervention in Southeast Europe has been the belief that if state building is to be successful, the ethnic mosaic of the Balkans needs to be tidied up. No shortage of statesmen have been ready to advocate the compulsory transfer of populations in order to bring peace to Asia Minor in the 1920s, Cyprus in the 1960s, and Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

If Balkan peoples are often viewed as expendable, it may be because influential outsiders have viewed their basic political standards as being little different from the tyrannical rulers who have often ruled over them. The fact that such leaders were often helped to power by one or other of the great powers is not felt to be significant.

This book looks at the dangerous effects of such stereotypes and tries to explain why they and the often short-term and neglectful policies underlying them have been retained for a long historical period.

#### THE IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHY ON BALKAN HISTORY

The Balkan peninsula is the largest of the three European peninsulas that extend into the Mediterranean sea. It is bounded on the west by the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, on the east by the Black Sea, and on the southeast by the Aegean Sea (Hupchick 1994: 47). There is less agreement about its northern limits, but the Carpathian Mountains which cut across Romania before extending into Slovakia are seen as an approximate northern boundary.

From a geographical point of view, the defining feature of the region is its mountainous character. *Balkan* derives from the Turkish word for mountain and nearly 70% of the land area is comprised of mountains, hills, or upland plateaux. Indeed the peninsula is crisscrossed by mountain ranges running in all directions. They act as a barrier to communication, as is also the case in the Iberian peninsula where intensely local outlooks have bred implacable regional and subnational outlooks.

A number of rivers cross the Balkans in a southeastern direction. The most important is the Danube. It rises in south Germany and flows across the Hungarian and north Yugoslav plains before breaking through the Transylvanian Alps at the famous Iron Gate. It then broadens with the plains of Wallachia on the left and the Bulgarian uplands on the right before draining into the Black Sea. The other notable rivers are the Sava which rises in Slovenia and joins the Danube at Belgrade as well as the Maritsa, Struma and Vardar rivers which flow into the

Aegean. The valleys bordering these waterways provide arable land and the only easy overland communications.

The geography of Southeast Europe lacks any obvious centre of gravity (Hoesch 1972: 15). The long Adriatic coastline extending from the Istrian peninsula to Albania is separated from its natural hinterland by high mountains. Indeed these mountains run parallel to the coast and a Mediterranean-type climate quickly gives way to a continental one. This division between coast and mountains is a fundamental one. It forced the coastal inhabitants to look towards the open seas. Their cities were the gateways for foreign cultural influences and were often controlled by states at odds with those that existed in the highland interior (Hupchick 1994: 48, Hoesch 1972: 15).

In the eastern parts of the Balkans communications were easier. The Danube is surrounded by fertile plains as it flows eastwards between the Dinaric Alps and the Carpathians. Fertile river valleys in the Thracian plain south of the Danube make communications easier across lower lying mountains than those in the northwest. These river corridors and mountain passes opened up the peninsula to external control and were routes that invading forces could easily traverse (Jelavich 1983a: 3).

The mountainous terrain and the lack of a natural centre around which a great state might evolve retarded the development of the Balkan peninsula (Sowell 1998: 175). The region's considerable mineral wealth was usually exploited by outsiders from the Romans to the Nazi and Soviet overlords of our own times. Kingdoms like that of 4<sup>th</sup>-century BC Macedonia or medieval Serbia or Tito's Yugoslavia (effectively a communist monarchy) had relatively short life spans. Most scholars emphasise the isolation of human settlements among self-contained river valleys and upland plateaux (Hupchick 1994: 48; Hoesch 1972: 17). The local isolation in 'a jumble of mountainous valleys and cul-de-sacs' contributed to the region's striking ethnic diversity (Kostanick in Jelavich & Jelavich 1963: 2). The Montenegrin and Albanian mountain peoples remained a law unto themselves until modern times and only nominally submitted to Ottoman rule (Hoesch 1972: 16). To one local writer, unyielding geography succeeded in creating a culture of 'secrecy and distrust that are part of the stereotypical Balkan character' (Bookman 1994: 15). Competition for the peninsula's limited agricultural resources bred highly territorial microcultures, from the classical Greek city states to the modern Balkan states, unable to easily agree over frontiers (Hupchick 1994: 48).

But history written from a nationalist standpoint has often overlooked the degree to which a wide range of peoples settled and mixed with each other. Surprisingly similar traditions of music, cuisine, agricultural practice, architecture and folk culture do not suggest that the Balkan peoples, even ones who today are sharply at odds, continuously stood apart from one another.

#### THE BALKANS THROUGH OUTSIDE EYES

Today viewed as peripheral lands, the Balkans historically have found themselves at a crossroads where competing political systems and imperial ambitions have met and collided (Jelavich & Jelavich 1963: 131 note 12; Gallagher 1999). Parts of the region have always acted as a gateway or a bridge offering many opportunities of peaceful contact between not dissimilar peoples. Paddy Ashdown, leader of the British Liberal Democrat Party from 1987 to 1999 and a Western politician who has shown unusual empathy with the region's problems, has argued that '[T]he Balkan states have enjoyed peace chiefly where there has been an overarching power structure to bring stability', the Ottoman and Hapsburg Empires, along with the communists being seen as providing that equilibrium for longer or shorter periods (Ashdown 1999).

Better known outsiders like Henry Kissinger who characterize the Balkans as a zone of unremitting ethnic strife and deep-seated backwardness often fail to appreciate how varied levels of political development could be. Montenegro, where the severing of enemy heads was 'the poetry of warfare' and exhibiting the heads a sign of public acclaim to be remembered and marked on gravestones, was one feature of Balkan reality that endured into the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Goldsworthy 1998: 232). Another was the city of Dubrovnik, virtually within sight of Montenegro, which for hundreds of years enjoyed a republican system of government advanced for its day until Napoleon extinguished its freedom in 1806 (Jelavich 1983a: 98–9).

Transylvania, a transitional territory straddling the Balkans and Central Europe, has been notable for the mingling of religions, cultures, and languages. In the Middle Ages, when much of Western Europe was awash in the blood of religious heretics, it was a beacon of religious toleration where Hungarian Catholics and Protestants respected each other's faiths and tolerated that of the Orthodox Romanians. 'Transylvania had its high Middle Ages, cathedrals, Cistercians, a whiff

of the Renaissance, its Baroque, its Enlightenment', wrote a Hungarian American perhaps tired of its new-found fame as the location of the Dracula horror movies (Lukacs 1982).

Bosnia is another meeting place where different cultures managed to coexist, if often uneasily, for centuries. But its multinational traditions finally succumbed to the furies of nationalism after the Cold War when the prospects of a common European home emerging from the embers of superpower rivalry proved a cruel deception. A Bosnia shared by Muslims and Eastern and Western Christians was always bound to be vulnerable to seismic political eruptions as long as Southeast Europe was one of the key faultlines between conflicting political systems.

Dazzling reversals of fortune have periodically occurred for empires, nations, and political systems that have created deep frustration and insecurity. Nowhere else in Europe has been accustomed to such upheavals, at least on the scale and frequency with which they have occurred in the Balkans. The latest one encompasses not just the wars in ex-Yugoslavia but the collapse of a communist social system which has brought poverty for millions of people even in countries that had remained at peace. It is perhaps no wonder that in the face of such calamities, fatalism has emerged as one of the defining characteristics of many of the Balkans' inhabitants.

Barbara Jelavich, the most accomplished historian of the region, has described the Balkans as 'a testing ground for alternative systems' and for 'the past two centuries ... a laboratory in which some of the most elusive aspects of national and liberal forms of political organization and economic development could be observed' (Jelavich 1983a: x). The collision between its multinational traditions and the new force of nationalism turned the region into Europe's principal danger zone as powers with conflicting interests and ambitions increasingly meddled in its affairs.

The Eastern Question resulting from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Russian rivalry in the Balkans, but drawing in other states, concerned how to manage and divide the Balkan territories of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. It produced in the 1854–56 Crimean War, the only general European conflict between 1815 and 1914. The First World War, 'a conflict whose immediate origins were deeply rooted in Balkan problems', provided the region and its people with a profoundly negative image (Jelavich 1983a: x). It was one destined to endure as the Balkans was periodically convulsed by the whirlwind of war and revolution which made the period from 1914 to 1999 one of endemic

conflict and repression in much of Europe's eastern half. Two Balkan wars fought in 1912 and 1913 between local claimants for the remains of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, and then the assassination in Sarajevo of the heir to the Austrian throne on 28 June 1914, bequeathed the term 'Balkanization' to the world as one denoting conflict arising from the fragmentation of political power. The Balkan states usually had conflicting territorial claims as well as ethnic minorities that had to be assimilated or driven out. They formed unstable local alliances, sought backing from outside powers in order to guarantee security or satisfy national ambitions and, in turn, were used by those powers for their own tactical advantage.

#### WHO IS TO BLAME?

In some eyes, it is primarily because of its adverse geographical location that the Balkans is fated to be a zone of troubles. The eastern part of Europe to which it belongs is at a disadvantage by being blocked off from the world's oceans. Coastal mountains along the Adriatic act as a barrier against the spread of cultural influences from the Mediterranean. Winter temperatures in Sarajevo may be 25 degrees colder than on the coast, little more than one hundred miles away (Sowell 1998: 175). Such rugged terrain causes high transportation costs which impede trade. Such adverse geographical conditions have inevitably frustrated efforts at political unification. On the other hand, the peninsula is separated from Asia Minor only by the narrow waters of the Turkish straits and from Italy only by the Straits of Otranto with the Danube basin being a vital passageway for a succession of foreign invaders. The Balkans has therefore lacked the physical good fortune of the northern peninsula of Scandinavia, whose geography has shielded it from the storms that have made Europe one of the world's most violent continents.

More highly charged is the viewpoint that 'people in the Balkans are fated, by history or genetics, to kill one another' (Sells 1996: xiv). It received powerful endorsement during the 1992–95 Bosnian War. David Owen, the key international mediator in that conflict wrote that '[H]istory points to a tradition in the Balkans of a readiness to solve disputes by taking up arms and acceptance of the forceful or even negotiated movement of people as a consequence of war' (Owen 1996: 3). In 1994 the President of the USA, Bill Clinton, described a 'conflict which had been there for hundreds of years ... the truth is people there keep killing each other' (Cohen 1968: 244).

Sometimes there is local endorsement for explanations of Balkan problems centred around the prevalence of 'ancient ethnic hatreds'. Adil Zulfikarpasić, a Swiss-based businessman born into a prominent Bosnian Muslim family, wrote in 1991:

I told you that the casualties that occurred in the Lebanon in the course of a whole year would occur in Bosnia in one week. We are different, we have a different temperament, the Balkans is a dangerous region. Some nationalities faint when they see blood, but we in the Balkans go delirious. We become intoxicated. (Zulfikarpasić 1998: 151)

It is hardly surprising that parts of Southeast Europe deny a Balkan identity because of its association with unpredictability, lawlessness, and cruelty. Romania's first king, Carol I, stated in 1910 that 'we belong to the Balkans neither ethnographically, nor geographically, nor any other way' (Seton-Watson 1934: 436). The Croatian leader Franjo Tuđman (whose surname suggests that an ancestor may have been an interpreter in the Ottoman Empire) vowed in 1997 that Croatia would reject any future multilateral cooperation with Balkan states and threatened to alter the Constitution to prevent what he saw as a slide back towards old Yugoslav arrangements.

In Romania, the *Academia Romaniaa* dictionary states that 'Balcanic' 'means *inapoiat* (backward), *primitiv*, *necivilizat*' (Goldsworthy 1998: 4). It is hardly surprising that successive foreign ministers, Teodor Melescanu and Adrian Severin, tried to advance Romania's case for NATO membership by arguing that Romania understood the problems of the Balkan region, but did not actually belong to it (Gallagher, 1998). Geographically a good case can be made that Romania lies outside the Balkans but historically, southern Romania, the seat of power, has been part of the Balkan social system as one of Romania's best contemporary historians Neagu Djuvara has admitted (Gallagher 1997: 70).

Another local view asserts that people are 'good' or 'bad' according to their social origins. Ed Vulliamy, one of the finest chroniclers of the Bosnian war, contrasted the implacable, suspicious and traditionally-minded peasants living in isolation from other ethnic groups with the cosmopolitan inhabitants of Bosnia's cities (Vulliamy 1994: 40). Prominent ethnographers and anthropologists in Yugoslavia have sometimes claimed that 'there is something inherently anarchic or violent in the character of the Dinaric Alpine people, among whom Serbs and Croats are to be found'. These are the words of Cvijeto Job, a former Yugoslav ambassador who went on to say that 'much has been made of the recurrent subordination of the mercantile, more urban and Europeanized



settlements along the Drava, Sava ... and other rivers by the more backward populations coming in from the hinterland' (Job 1993: 55).

Occasionally, foreign statesmen will endorse such racial stereotypes. William Gladstone, the great British Liberal of the Victorian era, advocated the mass expulsion of Turks from Bulgaria in 1876, giving dangerous currency to the belief that in the Balkans mixed populations could simply not live together (*The Economist* 1999: 28 May). His successor, David Lloyd-George, took the incompatibility of Christians and Muslims living in western Asia Minor for granted while Hitler regarded ethnic separation as an article of faith in the 1940s.

As the protracted nature of Balkan wars in the 1990s required more concentrated attention to be given to the region, foreign policymakers were struck by the ease with which tyrannical government prevailed in Serbia and Croatia, the two largest units of the former Yugoslavia. David Owen professed disgust at having to deal with 'leaders who ... displayed a callousness of mind in which the people's view never seemed to come near the conference table, despite much consulting of assemblies and the holding of referenda in circumstances of dubious democratic validity' (Owen 1996: 3). He was shocked by the propensity of politicians to lie openly and repeatedly: '[N]ever before in over thirty years of public life have I had to operate in such a climate of dishonour, propaganda, and dissembling. Many of the people with whom I had to deal in the former Yugoslavia were literally strangers to the truth' (Owen 1996: 1). But another prominent Western figure, Warren Zimmermann, the USA's last ambassador to Yugoslavia, has preferred to pay tribute to the politicians he knew from the different Yugoslav regions who tried desperately to avert the disaster of interethnic strife that brought down Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Zimmermann 1999: 124, 125–6).

Hugh Seton-Watson, a distinguished British Scholar of Eastern Europe, was always fascinated by the broad moral spectrum into which Balkan figures could be placed. He wrote in 1960 that '[O]f all my travels, I think the most enlightening were in the Balkans, whose combination of intellectual subtlety and crudity, of tortuous intrigue and honest courage revealed more truths about the political animal man than are to be found in most textbooks of political science' (Seton-Watson 1960: 15).

While perhaps denying the 'ancient ethnic hatreds' metaphor, some commentators are ready to ascribe the post-1989 Balkan crises to 'the crippling dependence of *all* [my emphasis] Balkan peoples on the

ideology and psychology of expansionist nationalism' (Hagen 1999: 52). The Balkan expert, William V. Hagen, sees the Balkan states as 'all born in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as irredentist nations—that is nations committed to the recovery of their "unredeemed" national territories' (Hagen 1999: 53). The Balkans seems to invite such sweeping generalizations from outsiders. The fact that countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary have, in the 1990s, formally renounced claims to neighbouring territories which had previously been part of their national 'imagined community' is unacknowledged by Hagen. However, it remains true that nationalists are often readier to bend or flout the truth than other political practitioners because they see their cause as a sacred one. In the words of the Romanian philosopher, Emil Cioran, writing in 1935:

The myths of a nation are its vital truths. they might not coincide with the truth; this is of no importance. The supreme sincerity of a nation towards itself manifests itself in the rejection of self-criticism, in vitalization through its own illusions. And, does a nation seek the truth? A nation seeks power. (Volovici 1991: 187)

#### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Outside forces have pursued different strategies in the Balkans since the region emerged as a major problem in international relations. Initially, the powers pursued their own interests, carrying out map changes to suit the shifting balance of power and sometimes clashing directly when compromise was beyond their reach. The diplomatic carve-up agreed at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 ruled out the creation of a viable pattern of states. The negative image of the region, its politicians, citizens, political institutions and its potential to overcome its problems handicapped the Western powers and Russia. The placing of the Balkans at the bottom of the geopolitical hierarchy of states and peoples meant that the quality of diplomacy and resultant policymaking were often poor. In 1920 E. H. Carr, a prominent British diplomatic mandarin, cautioned a group of Western ambassadors 'not to take the new nations of Europe too seriously' because their affairs 'belong to the sphere of farce' (Gati 1992: 111).

Examples from the 1850s to the 1990s show that key actors, from foreign minister to ambassador, can commit serious mistakes, sometimes resulting in tragic consequences, and not risk official censure or damage to their careers. Benign neglect, avoidable errors, and an