

Zitierhinweis

Janjetović, Zoran: Rezension über: Katrin Boeckh, Serbien, Montenegro. Geschichte und Gegenwart, Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2009, in: Südost-Forschungen, --, 68 (2009), S. 566-567, <https://recensio-stag.lorax.syslab.com/r/bb92163d07a006e76e5f97966c5c9616>



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Mehrwert generieren können. So aber bleibt es dem Lesepublikum überlassen, aus dem heterogenen Material weiterführende Schlüsse zu ziehen.

Zürich

Daniel Ursprung

Katrin BOECKH, Serbien/Montenegro. Geschichte und Gegenwart. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet 2009. 256 S., zahlr. Abb., ISBN 978-3-7917-2169-9, € 26,90

An American journalist once said that the Balkan peoples produced more history than they could consume. Katrin Boeckh was brave enough to take on thousand years long histories of two Balkan countries in one book. Furthermore, she undertook to explain how two distinct peoples evolved from common ethnic ancestors – and all that on 250-odd pages. Mission impossible, one would think. Indeed, it would be for many other historians of smaller format. However, Mrs. Boeckh proved her mettle and wrote one of the best short syntheses of Serbian/Montenegrin history.

The book is not meant, at least not primarily, for experts on the South-East European history. It is more attuned to the needs of interested general readers, journalists, politicians, businessmen and tourists, which made the author's task that much more difficult. That histories of two and not just of one country were presented in this volume was at first due to the fact that it was meant for a series of state histories – at the time Serbia and Montenegro still formed (a kind of) a common state. Nevertheless, even after the dissolution of their state union, the scholarly justification for regarding the histories of the two countries parallelly remained valid, as the author clearly proved: not only were they part of one state throughout the largest part of 20th century, but their histories were inextricably intermingled ever since the Middle Ages. This doesn't mean the two countries shared the same past throughout that period, but only that their histories were interconnected. Katrin Boeckh knew how to depict their common traits, but also their differences, defying those nationalist historians in both Serbia and Montenegro who often try to prove that Serbs and Montenegrins either shared completely the same past, or that they had nothing in common whatsoever.

The book consists of an introduction and 14 chapters of unequal length. The size of each chapter is not mechanically commensurate to the length of the time-period it deals with. Thus, parts of the book on the Medieval Serbia and Montenegro and the Ottoman rule fill only 36 pages, the 19th century some 20, whereas 150 pages are devoted to the 20th and the first years of the 21st century. This is in keeping with the targeted audience. That, however, doesn't mean older periods were neglected. On the contrary, enough was said about them to enable the reader to understand the Serbian and Montenegrin past as a whole, as well as to understand the present of these two countries.

The work is written in a well-weighted tone and many moot topics which had been dealt with in a distorted and rather propagandistic manner during the past 20-odd years, were

analyzed with the aid of solid historiographical facts. Thus Mrs. Boeckh clearly explains the importance of Kosovo, not only for the medieval Serbian state, but also for the creation of Serbian national consciousness. She doesn't fail to point out to the mythical roots of some notions about history shared by large parts of the Serbian population, but without condemnation or labeling – being aware that other peoples often cherish similar myths. The author sees the roots of the Kosovo problem in the (relatively) late immigration of the Albanians, but also in the expulsion of the Albanian population from parts of Serbia liberated from the Ottoman rule in the 1876-1878 wars. Although they overstep the geographical boundaries of the work, Serbian migrations towards the North-West were also depicted, since they had created territorial dispersal of the Serbian people which led to bloody conflicts, particularly in the 20th century.

The thorny question of the Montenegrin ethnogenesis is tactfully dealt with: by relying on the historical evidence Mrs. Boeckh describes the evolution of their national consciousness from Serbian (which they shared throughout larger part of their history) to the evolution of a distinct ethnic feeling among large parts of the Montenegrin population during the 20th century. Her explanation is a level-headed example for nationalists, by no means only Serbian or Montenegrin, that ethnic affiliations are not eternal, but to a great extent historical and situational. Another important point is, that not the language, common ancestry, culture or religion are decisive for national consciousness, but rather the feeling of ethnic distinctness which doesn't need strong factual backing.

Another painful question – that of the break-up of Yugoslavia – was depicted with circumspection and objectivity. One has the impression that the author said too little about the economic background of the break-up, but for this larger part of responsibility lies with the Serbian historiography which sorely neglected economic topics. On the other hand, one cannot accept her claim that the Milošević regime deliberately caused economic difficulties: indeed, the economic crisis had already been very deep when he came to power, and some of his economic measures have only aggravated it.

Despite this and a few other tiny mistakes, the work of Katrin Boeckh is probably the best of its kind. If one takes into account histories of Serbia and Montenegro of comparable size, than it is certainly the best. It would be very good if this book were translated into English. In that way it could at least partly undo some of the damage the spate of superficial, biased and unscholarly works on Serbian and Montenegrin history have wreaked in the world public during the last 20 years.

Belgrade

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