BOSNIA

A SHORT HISTORY

New, Updated Edition

NOEL MALCOLM

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YAYASAN KEPIMPINAN PERDANA

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For Ahmed and Zdravko

'Bosnia lies at the nodal point of the great historic civilizations and her history is difficult to write, because it needs several languages and a knowledge of very complicated events. In view of the Bosnian disaster today, it also needs an understanding of the world after the Cold War. To combine these qualifications in a book that is accessible is a formidable undertaking, defeating all but the best. Noel Malcolm is the best: here he has triumphed, and there is not a page, from the surveys of archaeological evidence at the start, to the moral condemnation at the end, which is out of place.'

NORMAN STONE

Contents

Acknowledgements ix
A Note on names and pronunciations xi
Maps xiii

Introduction xix

1 Races, myths and origins: Bosnia to 1180 1
2 The medieval Bosnian state, 1180–1463 13
3 The Bosnian Church 27
4 War and the Ottoman system, 1463–1606 43
5 The Islamicization of Bosnia 51
6 Serbs and Vlachs 70
7 War and politics in Ottoman Bosnia, 1606–1815 82
8 Economic life, culture and society in Ottoman Bosnia, 1606–1815 93
9 The Jews and the Gypsies of Bosnia 107
10 Resistance and reform, 1815–1878 119
11 Bosnia under Austro-Hungarian rule, 1878–1914 136
12 War and the kingdom: Bosnia 1914–1941 156
13 Bosnia and the second world war, 1941–1945 174
14 Bosnia in Titoist Yugoslavia, 1945–1989 193
15 Bosnia and the death of Yugoslavia: 1989–1992 213
16 The destruction of Bosnia: 1992–1993 234
Epilogue: A short survey of events, 1993–1995 253

Notes 273
Glossary 317
Bibliography 323
Index 343

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A Note on names and pronunciations

Readers will notice that I have used the term 'Ragusa' until the early nineteenth century, and 'Dubrovnik' thereafter. For similar reasons, I have referred to Bosnian Orthodox and Bosnian Catholics until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, and Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats thereafter.

The names of territories, such as 'Serbia', are generally used – unless the context indicates otherwise – to refer to their modern (post-1945) geographical areas. Where 'Bosnia' is used as a geographical term, it normally means the whole territory of modern Bosnia and Hercegovina. The only exceptions are when I refer to 'Bosnia proper' (which means: excluding Hercegovina), or where the context clearly shows that I am referring to Bosnia in contradistinction to Hercegovina.

When writing about a multi-lingual and multi-national entity such as the Ottoman Empire, it is necessary to use terms from more than one language. I have tended to use the Turkish forms for general institutions of the Empire (such as *devşirme*), and Serbo-Croat forms for those which were either special to Bosnia, or incorporated in local geographical terms (such as *kapetanija* or *sandžak*). Where standard English forms exist (such as 'spahi'), I have used them. In the case of personal names, I have anglicized a few medieval names which have come down otherwise in a confusing plethora of forms (Stefan, Stepan, Stjepan), and have tried to keep to a standard format for those Ottoman names in which titles are embedded (Husejn-kapetan, Siavuš-paša). The pronunciation of Serbo-Croat is simple and regular; only the following important differences need to be observed.

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c	is pronounced	'ts'
č		'tch' (as in 'match')
ć		similar to 'tch', but a thinner sound, more like the thickened 't' in 'future'
dj		roughly like 'j' (as in 'jam')
j		'y' (as in 'Yugoslavia')
š		'sh'
ž		'zh' (as in 'Zhivago')

The pronunciation of Turkish is even simpler:

c	is pronounced	'j' (as in 'jam')
ç		'tch' (as in 'match')
ğ		is silent, but lengthens the preceding vowel
ı		the vowel in French 'deux'
ş		'sh'

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Mostar
SANDZAK.
Dubrovnik
(Ragusa)
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Pristina
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POST-1945 YUGOSLAVIA: REPUBLICS, AUTONOMOUS PROVINCES, HISTORIC REGIONS AND CITIES

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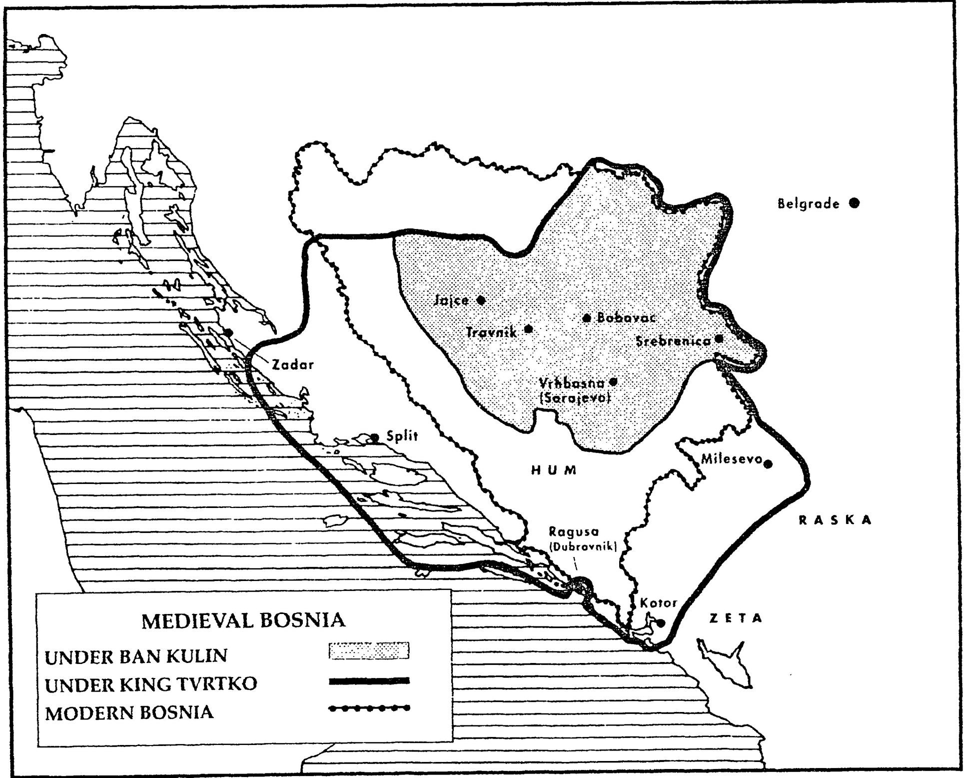

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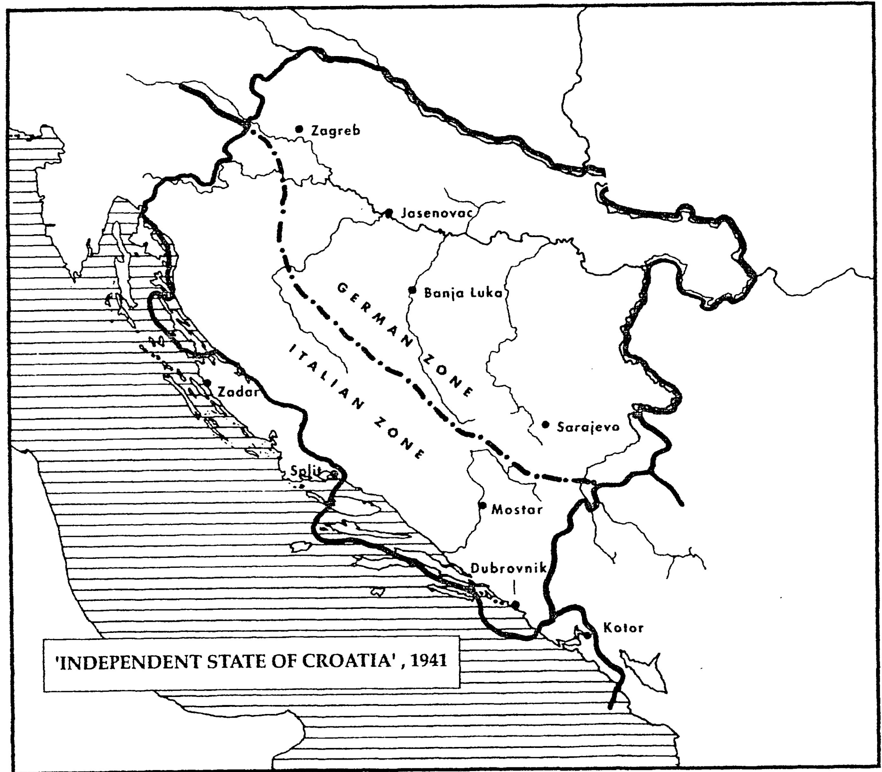

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Introduction

The years 1992 and 1993 will be remembered as the years in which a European country was destroyed. It was a land with a political and cultural history unlike that of any other country in Europe. The great religions and great powers of European history had overlapped and combined there: the empires of Rome, Charlemagne, the Ottomans and the Austro-Hungarians, and the faiths of Western Christianity, Eastern Christianity, Judaism and Islam. These facts alone would be sufficient reason for studying the history of Bosnia as an object of unique interest in its own right. But the war which engulfed this country in 1992 has added two melancholy reasons for examining its history more closely: the first is the need to understand the origins of the fighting, and the second is the need to dispel some of the clouds of misunderstanding, deliberate myth-making and sheer ignorance in which all discussion of Bosnia and its history has become shrouded.

Of these two needs, the second is by far the more urgent. Paradoxically, the most important reason for studying Bosnia's history is that it enables one to see that the history of Bosnia in itself does not explain the origins of this war. Of course the war could not have happened if Bosnia had not been the peculiar thing that it was, which made it the object of special ambitions and interests. But those ambitions were directed at Bosnia from outside Bosnia's borders. The biggest obstacle to all understanding of the conflict is the assumption that what has happened in that country is the product – natural, spontaneous and at the same time necessary – of forces lying within Bosnia's own internal history. That is the myth which was carefully propagated by those who caused the conflict, who wanted the world to believe that what they and their gunmen were doing was done not by them, but by impersonal and inevitable historical forces beyond anyone's control.

And the world believed them. It is for future historians to judge

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which arguments really weighed in the minds of the statesmen of Europe and America, while they reacted to the fighting in Bosnia with policies which not only failed to solve the crisis but actually made it much worse. What is clear is that their minds were already filled with a fog of historical ignorance. Here, for example, is the considered view of the British Prime Minister, John Major, addressing the House of Commons more than one year after the outbreak of the war:

> The biggest single element behind what has happened in Bosnia is the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the discipline that that exerted over the ancient hatreds in the old Yugoslavia. Once that discipline had disappeared, those ancient hatreds reappeared, and we began to see their consequences when the fighting occurred. There were subsidiary elements, but that collapse was by far the greatest (Hansard, 23 June 1993, col. 324).

It is hard to know where to begin in commenting on such a statement. The 'discipline' exerted by the Soviet Union on Yugoslavia came to an abrupt and well-publicized end in 1948, when Stalin expelled Tito from his Cominform organization. Perhaps Mr Major was trying to refer to the decision of Communist leaders such as Serbia's Slobodan Milošević to tap the springs of nationalism for their own political purposes; but this process was well under way in Serbia by the summer of 1989, two years before the 'collapse of the Soviet Union', and in many ways it hardly differed from the exploitation of nationalism by previous political leaders within the Communist system, such as Nicolae Ceauşescu. The idea that Communism in general acted as a valuable 'discipline' to keep nationalism under control is doubly false. Either Communist governments stirred up and manipulated nationalism for their own purposes; or they made it fester and become more virulent by creating a politically frustrated and alienated population; or, frequently, they did both. The double effect is clearly visible in most East European countries today, where the so-called 'extreme right' parties bring together ordinary voters who are roused by religious and historical symbolism from the pre-Communist age, and politicians whose previous careers were in the Communist Party and the state security services. That, more or less, is what has happened in Serbia too.

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The other great piece of misinformation expressed by John Major in those remarks, and repeated by most Western leaders in their public comments on the Bosnian war, is the claim that everything which has happened in Bosnia since the spring of 1992 is the expression of 'ancient ethnic hatreds' welling up of their own accord. That hatreds and rivalries existed in Bosnia's past is certainly true; those writers who have reacted in the last two years by portraying Bosnia as a wonderland of permanent inter-religious harmony have over-reacted. But a closer inspection of Bosnia's history will show that the animosities which did exist were not absolute and unchanging. Nor were they inevitable consequences of the mixing together of different religious communities. The main basis of hostility was not ethnic or religious but economic: the resentment felt by the members of a mainly (but not exclusively) Christian peasantry towards their Muslim landowners. This hostility was not some absolute or irreducible force: it varied as economic circumstances changed, and was also subject to political pressures which significantly altered the attitude of the landowning class during the first half of the nineteenth century. And the hostility between the Catholic and Orthodox communities was also subject to changing influences: rivalries between the Church hierarchies, political pressures from neighbouring countries, and so on.

These animosities were not permanently built into the psyches of the people who lived in Bosnia; they were products of history, and could change as history developed. The economic causes of hatred were eroded by changes and reforms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, until they had largely ceased to exist. The religious causes of hatred were reduced in the second half of the twentieth century by all the processes (some natural, some unnatural) of secularization. For most of the period after 1878, the different religious or ethnic communities in Bosnia lived peacefully together: the two major episodes of violence – in and just after the first world war, and during the four years of the second world war – were exceptions, induced and aggravated by causes outside Bosnia's borders. And since the second of those terrible episodes, two whole generations have grown up, the majority of the Bosnian population, who have no personal memories of the fighting in that war, and no particular desire to revive it.

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"Excellent." —*New York Times Book Review*

"Invaluable." —*Christian Science Monitor*

"By far the best available guide to the fatal steps to catastrophe."
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NOEL MALCOLM has covered the Balkans for nearly two decades and is the author of the acclaimed *Kosovo: A Short History.*

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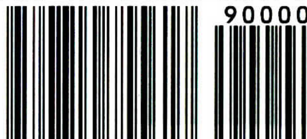

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