

Interview with Noel Malcolm (author of the book "Kosovo: A short History")

Interviewed from Orges Deliu

Question: Mr. Malcolm what gave the „primordial“ impulse to study the history of Bosnia and Kosova regarding the fact that another main topic of your work is the life and correspondence of Thomas Hobbes? There is no obvious connection between them?

Indeed there is no obvious connection between them. My original field of academic work was the history of philosophy. And I did my doctorate on the philosophy and theology of Thomas Hobbes. My interest in the Balkans at that time was just a completely secondary intellectual interest. When I was a student I travelled every year to the Balkans. And I had a certain system of learning every year a different language and travelling every summer in the country and that is how I learned Serbo-Croatian, Romanian and Greek and eventually Albanian, and I visited Kosova because at that time it was almost impossible to visit Albania except for tourists organised by Albanian Secret Security Service. And because I learned the languages I think I was more than a tourist, because I knew the history and their cultures and of course I was interested of Albanians as the most mysterious ingredient in the whole Balkan mixture, as the most unknown in the West. And my interest in Bosnia led me to comment on events in Jugoslavia at the break up of the old federation . At the start of the war I was then writing commentaries for the SPECTATOR magazine in London and I quickly saw that most of the comment appearing in the western media, especially in the British media, was expressing directly or indirectly Serb propaganda and if not political propaganda then Serb prejudices, Serb assumptions about the history of the Balkans because even serious history books in most cases was based on the products of Belgrade historiography and as I could see that these was creating a very distorted understanding and in some cases completely false understanding for example the claim that Bosnia was a totally artificial creation invented by Tito in 1945. I know these is childish but these was seriously stated and repeated in the western media and then used as a justification for allowing Milloshevic to make what he wanted. So I decided that I would write a book about the history of Bosnia to correct these false impressions, misunderstandings. I wrote it quickly, there was a war and I wanted to have some attention from the politicians and the media so I had to produce it quickly. While I was writing I thought many times about Kosova and I knew that a similar book would be needed for Kosova and that although it did not have a war it would probably have a war in a few years of time and so the day after I finished writing the book of Bosnia I went back to the library and

started preparing the history of Kosova. I had more time to work on that book because there was not a war going on (I would never say these to my bosnian friends, but I think that my book on Kosova is much better than my book on Bosnia). But to answer your question, no there is no real connection between the two themes and I interrupted some major academic projects on Hobbes in order to write on Bosnia and Kosova and now finally after an interruption of 10 years I'm getting back to Thomas Hobbes.

Question: Your conclusion about the origin of the Albanians is that Albanians should be offsprings of the Illyrians. In your opinion the key for the solution of the mystery of the Albanian origin is far more the Albanian language than the Archaeology? What are the main arguments you support and what was the echo among the specialists community?

First of all yes I do think that linguistic research is the best to investigating the question of the origins of the Albanians, archeology just doesn't give you the information you need. Linguistics is also not very exact in these matter but it depends of course what evidence you have for comparisons. The problem has always been: there are two candidates for the ancestry of the Albanians, Illyrians and Thracians and we have a few fragments of Thracian, we have nothing in Illyrian, no inscription or actual words. We only have names, names of people names of places and I mean we have one or two comments in later classical writers who refer to a word or to a phrase but these part of evidence is very difficult to interpret. But the complicated arguments about place names are more complicated because obviously Thracian and Illyrian coexisted in the same places and some names are common to both languages so we are not talking about radically separated languages. We are talking perhaps about languages that borrowed from each other or were similar in structure and in origins but I think the balance of evidence is definitely on the Illyrian side of the equation. There are a number of tactical linguistic arguments but the one which I think is a strong argument and which I discuss in my book and is not being given the emphasis in the general specialists circles it deserves, is the argument about the structures of the phrases. It's clear that Thracian would put two names together in the way that most Indoeuropean languages do so for example the place name ST. Petersburg, Petrograd means Peter's City and in English it could be Peterborough or Petertown (at the same structure) but you cannot have these structure in Albanian (where you have the City of Peter). The structure of the place names in Illyrian is like the Albanian structure, the structure of the place names in Thracian is like the other structure and these is a deep structural characteristic something which is not changing over time, in effect it is difficult to see how it could change completely over time.

Question: why was it not emphasised?

I don't know you must ask the specialists. I found these argument stated by one linguist, I forgot his name it was one article that has included these point, and it was one point that somebody named out of six or seven points. For me it seems such a stronger and clear argument that I would get it much more emphasis but it is only one of a number of arguments and I think that the balance of the conclusion must be that the Albanians are descended from Illyrians and you asked me what reception, what echo has had it from the specialists? I have not seen a review of my book by an expert in these particular aspect of the historical linguistics and the origins of the Albanians, but I have seen some which is by people who know these problematic and have studied it , for example the greatest albanologist in Germany : Peter Bartle (München) and he was very positive about these book. I'll be very interested to see their judgement but I can't tell you what they think , perhaps they have not get it yet.

Question: [Your opinion about the quarter-century lasting resistance of the albanians under Gergj Kastrioti to the overwhelming power of the Ottomans and your appraisal, evaluation of the person of Gergj Katrioti?](#)

Well I don't say much in my book about these because my book is a history of Kosova and he had almost no direct impact on Kosova , only an almost negative story that he arrived late at the second battle of Kosova at 1448 and missed it by perhaps three days and I think if one had looked at the Albanian lands or particularly the territory of modern Albania present day Albania shortly after the death of Skanderbeg a pragmatic, realistic judgement at that time might have been that Skanderbeg at the end had achieved no practical result, it did not liberated territory permanently, in the end there was one battle after another many parts of the country have been devastated, people had fled out of the country across the Adriatic and a cold and pragmatic judgment then might have seen actually a negative one, but i think a later judgment with a broader perspective must be a different judgement , that he has done something of enormous symbolic importance for the future development of the Albanians as a people and not only for the Albanians themselves but for the whole of Europe and its understanding of the Albanians and he became the one Albanian that every one in Europe had heard of –[The interviewer: Volter and Edward Gibbon also mention him!](#)

- Edward Gibbon has written about the Balkans and you might expect it but even Thomas Hobbes at one point mentions Skanderbeg at the „Leviathan“ and these was something that in the long perspective ,I think, became very important but at the time was it realistic to expect to liberate permanently territory from the Ottoman Empire which could raise armies of hundreds of thousands of men if it wanted? The most that you could have was to just make so

much trouble so that they could leave you a sort of semi-independence. In some ways that happened "de facto" in the „malesi“ (mountains) eventually for several centuries but the semi-independence was a product of the fact that these territory was not in so far valuable for the Ottomans. If anything was valuable for them as the key ports or key roads or trading towns then of course they would keep control of it.

Question: The conversion of the most part of the Albanians is a well known fact, can you say something about the causes that triggered the change of religion and make a comparison between Bosnia and Albania . Similarities and differences? (concerning the conversion)

1. I think there is quite a strong similarity between Bosnia and Albania in these respect. Well these were the two places where in the end an absolute majority of the populace became Muslim. Modern research suggests that the most important reason was that these were areas where the Christian churches were weak and were in competition. These is obvious in Bosnia where you had the catholic and orthodox and the strange third in the Bosnian church. In Albanian lands the catholic church had some strength limited to it's traditional center in the northern Albania but it was very badly supported. Many places were without priests for about 20-30 years. In these circumstances in a traditional peasant society where the religion is really a kind of magic device for dealing with birth and death and harvests, to go without the people who do the magic for 20-30 years it is a disaster and if it is an alternative religion present which offers similar magic it is not --- to think this will interest us as well . Of course there were also social and economic advantages to become Muslim . But there are other parts of Balkans where the people also converted and I think we get a rather false impression if we think there were only Bosnians and Albanians converted. Plenty of Serbs converted, some converted back again to the orthodox when it become necessary to do it and some remained in the same directions and we call them Bosniaks . Macedonian Slavs converted, a lot of Greeks converted, a lot of Bulgarians converted . So we don't have to find such a special explanation for the Bosnians and Albanians, only a quantitative question why was it more in Bosnia and Albania , and I think the weakness of church organisation compared with the Serb orthodox church and the Greek orthodox church in the heartlands I think that is the main reason .

Question: It is some times pretended that the Turkish occupation proved itself as a prosperity generator for Bosnia (golden age) but not for Albania. What would you say over this issue?

I think the golden age is put a little too strong for Bosnia. But it did prosper in the first two or three centuries .In fact the Albanians lands improved economically in the first 2 or 3

centuries under ottoman rule . But it's true that Bosnia seems to have become generally more prosperous . I think one of the big differences is that Bosnians had some important towns , so it become a great trading center in Balkans, western Balkans. And Bosnia had a special importance in the eyes of the ottomans .It was the bastion , the front line against the Habsburgs , Croatia's non ottoman territory . Albanian lands were more a sort of backwater .They didn't develop such big towns. In Albania itself the only towns of importance were the trading towns of the coast. And coastal trade was one thing that did less well under the ottomans , because the ottomans limited some exports. For strategic reasons they limited the exports of gold. And during the war times they prohibited the export of all kinds of goods that might be useful to the Christian powers. So just to have a few ports was not enough to create economic prosperity for the hole hinterland . I think Albania never had such a large cities like Bosnia. Sarajevo was a major city ,Sofia and Thessaloniki which was also port but much bigger .and while the Albanian lands lacked the stimulus of the major cities . Although there were some important towns in Kosova, but on a smaller scale. But it is difficult to make judgements how the prosperity was, because we don't have enough evidence how the prosperity was before the ottomans. I think conditions life for ordinary peasants definitely improved in the first 100-200 years (of the ottoman rule).

Question:Which are the impressions you have from the development of the national conscience in Albanian territories , any peculiarity or striking feature of the Albanian Renaissance?

Well, it is true that such a national movement of the kind most European countries had, specially eastern and south eastern had come late to the Albanians. And the reasons are obvious. For that sort of movement you need some kind of intelligentsia you need schoolmasters , people writing books, people writing newspapers and the Albanians were worst equipped in the whole of Europe , because of the ottoman policy of education, refusing education in Albanian language . Because of the low economic development any way it did not support the middle class that you need for the intelligentsia to develop. So the intelligentsia which did exist was mainly in the diaspora in places like Bucharest , Istanbul, Cairo. and this are not good conditions for developing an active national movement. I think the peculiarity of the Albanian movement or something that was special about the Albanian example is the way that national identity was so focused on the language and the Albanian language was the main criteria for Albanian identity. In many ways it was very lucky I mean it was actually the simplest criteria to use and by eliminating questions of religions by

questions of national identity; they saved themselves from potential problems of a terrible kind. I mean this was most obvious in Greeks living in places like Janina who in the end were told by the Greek fighter you convert in the Greek orthodoxy and then you will be a real Greek or get out and go to Turkey. The human suffering is a forgotten element of what happened, but you know the human suffering was extraordinary and the Albanians never created that. I suppose that is the most peculiar feature, I mean historically the peculiar situation of the Albanians was that the process of state formation which was creating semi-independent states and then eventually fully independent states for the Christian populations the Greeks, the Bulgarians, the Serbs; this process was leaving the Albanians more and more as the residue the last of them left inside the Ottoman empire. Pragmatic political calculations suggested that the interest of the Albanians involved the defending of Ottoman empire. Otherwise their lands would be taken more and more by Greeks and Serbs. But at the same time they had to develop their national movement which also had to be anti-Ottoman and to aspire independence. So this was the paradoxical position and the most difficult position to be in. No other group, no other population in the Balkans had a problem as paradoxical as that. So they had things simple in one way and more difficult in another way. Finally the practical difference of it was that by the time they were ready to fight for independence so much land was already taken by the armies of the other countries that they were left with a truncated territory.

Question: [Was the declaration of the independence a belated move of the Albanian political elite?](#)

Well, I think I have answered partly in the question above. It came late, but I don't think it would be possible to do it much sooner given the political forces that existed.

Question: [Your comment on the division of the Albanian lands between five different states. Do you think that the conditions are propitious for the reunion of the Albanians?](#)

Well, as I have just said it was just a historical fact that by the time when the Albanians were able to fight their independence, well-prepared armies of the neighbour states specially the Serbian army had just taken a large part of these territories in 1912 and the whole of Kosovo and the large parts of the northern Albania at the same time. And it was a "fait accompli" for the London conference which recognised Albania and roughly agreed where the borders would be. It was not intended to reverse all those conquests, it was intended to regulate the situation and to stop Serbia from getting access to the Adriatic. Those were the two key aims agreed

generally by the western powers. But the idea it would tell them to go back and abandon territories taken in Kosova and Macedonia, these was never a serious proposition unfortunately. Under the audience were particular places in the border . France and Russia pushed very hard for Serbian interests , Austrio-Hungary pushed for Albanian interests, Britain was a chairmen with a sort of neutral position and in the end France and Russia were successful and got the most of the cities they wanted to Serbia.

You ask are the conditions right now for reuniting Albanian territories?

My answer is no. I do not see it. To reunite all the Albanians it would involve changing borders like in the ideal Albanian proposal of 1912. it is just not possible now it would mean to destroy Montenegro and Macedonia, or taking significant territories from them. No western government will ever support the taking of territories from these states. There is one possibility of course, which does not involves in these schemes and it is if Kosova becomes independent and they can freely choose to unify with Albania. I think it is a theoretical possibility , I think it should not be forbidden by the western powers,as they sometimes say it poses some territorial danger. It is generally accepted that any two countries can unite if they want to . East Germany united with west Germany, well I know these is a special example, but I remember in the 1970-ies there was a serious claim for Egypt and Libia to unite themselves in a kind of economic union, no body said oh we must stop it, Moldova and Romania after the end of the Soviet Union, people assumed that Moldova would join Romania , basically I know that is not a good analogy for Kosova and Albania

I do not have any objection for the unification but my political judgement as an observer now is that these is not a realistic scenario , I do not see any stronger political will on either side Tirana or Prishtina for that. Every senior politician , intellectual that I have met in Albania and in Kosova for many years I have always asked the same question : If Kosova become independent and if it was possible to unite with Albania and if it was a simultaneous referendum in Albania and in Kosova do you believe that it would be a majority saying yes to unification , from both sides or either side? And every single person that I have asked has said frankly no , I do not believe it would be a majority . The only different answer that I've got was from Rexhep Qosja, who was silent for a long time and then said I would vote for it but i do not know whether we will get the majority.

Question: You have called the Albanian communist party a „puppet of Tito“. What would you say about the Yugoslav influence on the Albaninan communist movement, what about the foundation and organisation of the communist party in Albania? And something about the antagonism Cetniks vs. Communists in Jugoslavia

Ballist vs. Communists in Albania ?

Yes on the Albanian communist party I think it has always been clear that the Albanian communist party was controlled by Tito , ultimately by Moscow but directly by Tito in the second world war. And Tito had an absolutely dominant position vis a vis Enver Hoxha even after the second world war in 1946-47. Recent documents have strengthened that to very interesting focuses . Secret documents from the archives in Tirana which were published by the archivist in 1995-96, Luan Maltezi published these documents, and they show that the two jugoslaves Popoviç and Mugosha were really controlling every thing that mattered so they were giving instructions, strategy , I mean they were the professionals who had done it before , Hoxha was a beginner , he said it in one of his speeches : When we started at the beginning I had no idea of organisation, I depended on our comrades from Yugoslavia. I think a little of these relationship of the dependence was known a long time ago some details were known a long time because after the break in 48 when Tito was denounced as a sectarian, Tito arranged for his preferred journalist Vladimir Didie to publish a book about Albanian - Jugoslav relations and gave him damaging information about Enver Hoxhas subservience to Tito. And because at this time some people said it is Belgrade propaganda and it was the great disagreement with Stalin and of course he will publish things like this but in fact it was based on real documents and these book from Didie is extraordinary actual. I think it's just a matter of basic historical fact but i think it was not an autochthonous communist movement that came out of the soil of Albania. It was something organized from outside, I'm not speaking about the men that joined it but I'm talking about the central organisation.

The question of the antagonism Cetniks vs. Communists and Ballists vs. Communists.

Interviewer: Initially they fought both against the axis powers and then it became a civil war.

Yes, in the basic strategic situation they were in, there are quite strong similarities. As you said it started as a pro British, pro American and it ended as "de facto" allies of the axis. Both were drawn into these position by a situation in which the communist forces were quite happy to get involved in a kind of ideological civil war against their political rivals or enemies. Communist leaders talked about creating national front that would include other forces as well but this was always just empty rhetorics, they wanted to control directly and if there was anyone that would not be controlled directly by them they would turn him into an enemy and hunt him down. This happened to Muharrem Bajraktari (not just him) in northern Albania, who was not a ballist not a communist but an independent local leader caught in a resistance

fight against the Germans but he too in the end, because he refused to take direct instructions from the communist organisation, was denounced and attacked by them. So in the broad picture there were some similarities but there were differences as well.

The Cetniks had a very strong serb nationalist ideology which was fierce and virulent to certain non Serb elements especially Muslims on which they said should be sent to Turkey and they were also anti-Albanians whether or not they were Muslims. Curiously I have investigated quite a lot on the person of Mihalović and I don't think that he was such a bad example of these features, i think it was the circle of advisers around him people like Moliević, who was a very hard –line nationalist and then in the end created the policy to justify massacres on Bosnian Muslims and so on. I think there is no equivalent of this in the Albanian history. Well Balli kombetar was a nationalist party, it wanted a greater Albania, it had a strong nationalist agenda but I think it did not have a program of eliminating non-Albanian elements and another interesting difference: The Cetniks came politically from the old, broadly speaking, conservative side of the political spectrum in old prewar Yugoslav politics, Balli Kombetar has been systematically misrepresented by the communist historiography who presented it something extreme rightist, fascist and the standard rhetoric such as feudal base and so. Balli Kombetar was not a base party, it was not feudal, it was not reactionary. In the political spectrum it was center to left-center. Basically in the political history of modern Albania the people on the left supported Fan Noli against Zog, this side of the political spectrum later broke in two streams: the stronger part of the left went to the communists and the more moderate part of the left went to Balli Kombetar, and it was a republican party it was antimonarchist, yeas the primary issue was the nationalist, you know now it's what we call right wing, but in terms of general politics it was a centrist or even center leftist party. I've discussed it with many people, I even have discussed it with an extraordinary Albanian who lived in London, who suddenly died last year Isan Toptani, he was from the famous Toptani family big landowners in the Tirana region who played a central role in the second world war history. Key meetings took place at his house between British officers and political forces. He knew the whole political landscape of prewar Albania, indeed members of his family were in every government. And he said yes you are right „Balli Kombetar“ didn't like beys, they were anti-feudal, and definitely anti monarchist. I don't know if you've seen the Yusuf Vrioni biography, very interesting book and he describes how he in the war wanted to join Balli Kombetar and he went to see someone that was a senior member and he said: can I join the party? And he said: no we don't want people like you from the Beys. Anyway how it turned out in the end, under the pressure of the situation

when it became a collaborationist force, helping the Germans in the last period of the war, that's another story. In that respect you can make this parallel with the Cetniks in Yugoslavia but I think it is different from them in very significant ways.

Question: Which is your opinion, was the antagonism between Ballists and Communists directed from the Yugoslav „center“ ?

I think the whole strategy of the communist leadership was to eliminate any rival resistance movement. This strategy did come originally from Moscow, from Tito wherever but it became a reflex, the natural strategy, they did not need specific instructions each time but yes it was standard communist practice that just fitted the pattern.