

Ottoman Kosovo (1458–1913)

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The Advancement of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and the Danube Valley

The fall of the Medieval Serbian Empire (1458) made it possible for the Turkish conquerors to acquire new territories of considerable size for themselves.¹ The most important benefit of this situation for the Turkish state was that they were able to have access to the River Danube and thus they were able to conquer the main migrational paths which were to be found in the centre of the Balkan peninsula. It is of less significance that by acquiring these Serbian areas, large mountainous regions were now held by the Turks in the West Balkans. Kosovo was the most valuable of those areas.

¹ J. MATUZ, *Az Oszmán Birodalom története*, Budapest 1990, pp. 63–64.

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After the fall of the Medieval Serbian state it was the Kingdom of Hungary and its central areas in the Danube Valley that became the next military target for the Ottoman Empire. During the reign of King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490), the Hungarian state strengthened and it was able to temporarily slow down the advancement of the Ottoman troops. On the other hand, Hungary was unable to prevent the Ottoman expansion in most of the Balkans. In addition, the Ottoman troops conquered areas of considerable size along the eastern borders of Anatolia, as well as in Mesopotamia, Arabia and Egypt.² After the death of King Matthias Corvinus, under the reign of his successors, the Hungarian state weakened significantly and it was not able to withstand Turkish military endeavors.

1521 and 1526 were turning points in the conquest of the Danube Valley; the first date was the year when Suleyman conquered Belgrade and, the second marked the date when the Turkish troops wiped out the whole Hungarian army at Mohács. After these two military events it became possible for the Turks to aim at taking over the key position in the Danube Valley and acquiring dominance in this area, a role, the Kingdom of Hungary used to have. By taking Belgrade it was for the first time in Turkish history that the army had a base in the Danube Valley and use it as a springboard for further military operations. The area was vital for them when they launched longer military campaigns in the direction of Central Europe and they did not have to consider the season-dependent road conditions of the Balkans.

In addition, Hungary was weakening and wavering between two royal dynasties, so it also fell apart politically after the lost battle of 1526 at Mohács; Hungary was not able any longer to manage the streams of people arriving from the upper Danube region and from the Balkans. It took the Turks two decades (1526–1541) to annex the part of Hungary along the Danube and to make this area an organic part of the Ottoman Empire.³ The reasons behind these events included on the one hand the structure of the Ottoman rule itself and the changing conditions of the duality of the royal power in Hungary on the other.

² Ibidem, pp. 66–69.

³ L. GULYÁS, *Szulejmán a hadak élén*, in: *Nagymagyarország*, No. 1, 2013, pp. 14–23.



Map 1: Ottoman Empire in middle of the 17th century
Source: The author's compilation

After 1526 the Hungarians had two kings, one represented the Habsburg dynasty, the other, János Szapolyai was a member of the Hungarian higher nobility. The two kings fought with each other, too, and the Turks often intervened, supporting János Szapolyai. It was at the same time that the peoples of the Balkans took part in the struggles of the Turkish army. In 1541 the Turks annexed those areas of Habsburg-ruled Hungary – including its centre, Buda – which had been conquered by them.

From this time on, since the Habsburgs obtained the Hungarian crown and the Turkish-occupied areas were annexed by the Ottoman Empire, the dominant role of the Kingdom of Hungary in the Danube Valley ceased to exist. It was replaced by the 150-year-long struggle between two rivalising

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world powers, the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The latter one brought peoples from the Balkans into the Carpathian Basin, consequently, in the period until the end of the 17th century, significant Hungarian areas became part of the Balkan sphere. The Balkan state was part of the Ottoman Empire for a much longer period and the process of their integration into the Ottoman Empire speeded up from the 16th century onwards.

The interrelatedness of the spatial structures on the Balkans and along the Danube, as well as the inheritance of the Central European power zones of Kings Sigismund of Luxembourg and Matthias Corvinus, represented a perfect match for the Ottoman aims of territorial expansion and military power. Thus, from the middle of the 16th century on, one of the most decisive political and military aims of the Ottoman Empire was to expel the Habsburgs from the Danube Valley and connect the Balkans with the Central European power zone. This was not the only political and military aim of the Ottoman Empire: Eastern Europe, Persia, Arabia and Egypt were also important targets for its future conquests. But, it was the Danube Valley that the Turks invested significant human and material resources into so as to conquer the region and keep it under control for 150 years.

The First Period: Relatively Peaceful Coexistence (1458–1686)

It seems to be logical to ask the question why the above period in Kosovo's history is called the time of relatively peaceful coexistence. The answer to this question is complex and it comprises several elements. These are as follow:

- a) The general beneficial impact of the Turkish conquest.
- b) The economic interests of the Ottoman Empire and those steps they took in order to achieve their aims.
- c) Religious tolerance within the Ottoman Empire.

The first component to be detailed is the general beneficial impact of the Turkish conquest.⁴ If we do not consider the lost sovereignty and independence

⁴ N. MALCOLM, *Kosovo: A Short History*, New York 1999, pp. 93–101.

of the nations of the Balkans, then several beneficial features of the Turkish rule have to be noted. First, the former dividedness of its nations, the struggles against each other and the chaos that prevailed within the economy, all ceased to exist after the Turkish conquest. The region became one part of a well-organized empire. In addition, the target areas of the Turkish military campaigns were now outside of the Balkan region. Significant differences could be detected between the border zones, with military advances and possible attacks and the inner, mostly peaceful areas. On the basis of former models, the implementation of a new, imperial form of state was begun in the Balkan region. This structure by nature was different from that of the Byzantine and the Eastern Roman Empires. The new spatial structure had several levels and it had multiple functions: Turkish administration had the conquered areas made part of their military-based administration in many different ways. The establishment of vilayets of large size was typical, but there were enormous structural differences between them. On the edge, in areas where military clashes were possible, including the Danube Valley, the so-called active vilayets were born, while in areas, including the Western Balkans, life in the vilayets could be characterized by passive, more peaceful inner processes.

From the 17th century onward functional and developmental differences were detectable between the individual regions (vilayets). In border regions, which had a military function, the Ottoman structures did not take deep root, the processes were rather driven by military interests. It was only military centres that came into being in these areas and the relationship between the Turkish troops and the local inhabitants was restricted only to the presence of the military. The exchange of Turkish and non-Turkish population arriving from other areas of the Empire was continuous, and Islamisation was of lesser degree.

On the other hand economic activity and development were more significant in those areas, which were closer to the main roads leading to Istanbul and the River Danube. It was also in these areas where Ottoman

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centres of considerable size came into being. Ottoman structures also took root in local societies and the number of settlers arriving from Anatolia was also of significance. Consequently, the proportion of Islamic population in these areas also increased.

The situation of the Western and Southern Balkan regions, including Kosovo, represented a transition between the previously described characteristics. In these areas Ottoman power was quite solid, but they did not have a military presence of considerable size or did not build out many administrative centres. Local organizations (the Orthodox church, for example) played a considerable role.

Despite its relative significance Kosovo was brought about as an administrative unit at the end of the period of the Turkish rule. (The so-called Vilayet of Kosovo was officially established only in 1878, but, at that time, it was larger, than Kosovo today). From the 15th century to 1878 Kosovo was part of the Vilayet of Rumelia, except for a smaller area, which belonged to the Vilayet of Bosnia. There were several sandzaks within these large vilayets, but Kosovo, as an independent administrative unit was non-existent at this time.

When considering the economic characteristics of the region it is evident that the Turkish conquerors did everything they could so as to preserve Kosovo's economic prosperity. In the eastern parts of Kosovo the mining of precious metals had been of great significance as early as the Middle Ages.⁵ Serbian monarchs invited Catholic Saxon miners from Transylvania who settled down in this region. These miners were then the first to flee during the time of Turkish military escalation, but later the Ottoman state lured them back by granting the miners several privileges. It was the Mining Act of 1536 that summarized these privileges. The size and significance of mining in Kosovo can be illustrated by the fact that it was in Novo Brdo, Kosovo, where the largest mint of the Turkish state operated from 1480 onward. The akçe, the

⁵ L. GULYÁS – G. CSÜLLÖG, *Kosovo's Territorial Characteristics from the Roman Empire to the Fall of the Medieval Serbian State*, in: *West Bohemian Historical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2012, pp. 11–26.

chief Turkish monetary unit was made here in Kosovo as well, and then the coins were then transported to Istanbul.⁶

Urbanization was another feature of significance of that period. Since Kosovo was located at the crossroads dissecting the Balkans from the north to the south and from the east to the west, it was logical that tradesmen – primarily from the city of Ragusa – were ready to settle down in the vicinity of mines and markets where agricultural products were bought and sold. Due to these processes Pristina and Skopje were transformed into significant trade centres. In addition, craft goods were also of high quality in the cities of Kosovo. In the city of Prizren for example, a Turkish tax sheet of the middle of the 16th century listed 45 different kinds of handicrafts.⁷

The third component of significance was the religious tolerance of the Ottoman Empire. After the Turkish conquest Kosovo represented a living space for three different religions. The Catholics – actually only a few thousand people – represented the smallest community. This group of Catholics consisted of the descendants of Saxon miners and Ragusan tradesmen. Despite the fact that Rome, the centre of Catholicism, tried to keep in touch with the Catholic congregations of the Balkans, these religious communities practically ceased to exist by the end of the 18th century and their members got converted to the Islam.

The Orthodox Church, on the contrary, became the most important driving force of the religious and cultural life of the Serbian population. Although Orthodox religious life existed only in a simplified version in the period of the Turkish rule, Orthodox religious practices were able to contribute to the preservation of Serbian national identity. In Orthodoxy believers were very closely related to their local religious organizations, consequently, their links to the place (geography) and blood (relations and families) were also extremely solid. The power of the Serbian Orthodox Church is well illustrated by the fact that, in 1557 the Serbs, supported by the Turkish Sultan, were able

⁶ M. TAKÁCS, *Az oszmán Koszovó a 15–18. században*, in: *História*, No. 2, 2007, pp. 6–10.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

to reorganize the Patriarchate of Peć, which had legal authority all over the Ottoman Empire in areas with Serbian population. Thus the Serbian church became the strongest Christian organization in the Western Balkan area.⁸

What were the practical implications of this situation in Kosovo? The overwhelming majority of Kosovo's rural population was unequivocally the supporter of the Orthodox church in the 15th–17th centuries. Every settlement had at least one priest – occasionally even two, or three – and Kosovo could be characterised by a dense network of monasteries and monastic land properties. It was undoubtedly a glorious period in the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church which lasted until the end of the 17th century. Then, due to the Hungarian fights for independence of 1686–1699, this situation underwent a radical and unfavourable change.

Islam was the third religion. While in the 15th–17th centuries the majority of the rural population of Kosovo belonged to the Orthodox church, the inhabitants of the cities and towns underwent a process of Islamisation. The spread of the Islam in Kosovo was related to cities and towns, which represented the region's political and military centres. As our research data suggest, as early as the end of the 16th century, the majority of population in towns of significant size, including Peć, Pristina, and Prizren was Muslim. On the contrary, the Islamisation of the rural communities became significant only at the end of the 17th century.

When summarising the most important features of the first period (1458–1683), it can be stated that, in the 16th–17th centuries Kosovo, although it did not belong to the central regions of the Ottoman Empire, was an area of great significance in many respects. It was located in the inner, more peaceful part of the Balkans; it was in the vicinity of border zones so, it was close to the main migrational paths, too. This favourable location meant that Kosovo had a significant intermediary and collecting role. It had influences from several

⁸ P. KAPRONCZAY, *A koszovói konfliktus történelmi, politikai és kulturális háttere*, in: T. KRAUSZ (ed.), *A Balkán háborúk és a nagyhatalmak, Rigómezőtől Koszovóig*, Budapest 1999, pp. 23–36.

different directions and it had lively relationships with both the central and the Adriatic regions of Europe. Due to the religious tolerance of the Ottoman Empire it could become the cradle of different religions, ranging from the Islam to a variety of Christian religions. The favourable geographical conditions, Kosovo's location in a basin and the lively and diverse forms of trade resulted in economic balance and shaping geographical identity. By the nature of the Turkish rule, Kosovo was able to hide ethnic and religious differences.

Despite this feature it is necessary to discuss some ethnic processes as well. The disintegration of the Medieval Serbian state, the Turkish conquest of Kosovo and some features detectable in the Turkish-conquered Hungarian areas (the entry of the Serbs into the Turkish military), drew the Serbian population to the north, i.e. towards Hungarian territories.⁹ In the 15th–17th centuries a significant number of Serbs settled down in those areas of Hungary, which were under Turkish rule. It was primarily the areas between the Drava and the Sava Rivers, the regions of Temesköz and Bácska, which attracted the Serbs the most. The Serbian population, moving to the north from their Medieval dwelling places, was replaced by Albanians, who had left their mountainous regions. The north-moving Serbian population created the possibility for the Albanians to settle down in Kosovo. As a result, in the 16th–17th centuries the ethnic composition of Kosovo was more and more unfavourable for the Serbs. In this situation the Albanian population was soon to become the majority in Kosovo.¹⁰ This process was speeded up at the end of the 17th century by the Hungarian wars fought for the liberation of the country.

The Second Period: the Time of Strict Turkish Rule (1686–1804)

The beginning of the period of strict Turkish rule was marked by the Hungarian anti-Turkish wars. It was in 1683 that the Turkish army was defeated near Vienna and it marked the beginning of a so-called war of independence (1683–1699), during which the Habsburg army expelled the Turks from Hungary.

⁹ L. HEKA, *Szerbia állam- és jogtörténete*, Szeged 1994, pp. 62–73.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 55–58.

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During these wars there was one momentum (1690–1691) when the Habsburgs' military forces were already preparing for the siege of Istanbul. This is why the Habsburg Emperor Leopold issued a manifesto in April 1690, in which he promised to annex the newly conquered Balkan areas to the Kingdom of Hungary on the condition that the Serbs help the army to oust the Turks. It was also written down that the Habsburgs were willing to consider the Serbian areas as a separate region which would be ruled by a Voivod¹¹ The military campaign failed and the deserting Serbians had to run away in order to escape the revenge of the Turks. Arsenije Černojević, the patriarch of Ipek led those Serbian groups which had decided to move to Hungary. As far as the volume of settlement is concerned, historians' opinions differ. The number of fleeing Serbs is estimated from a minimum 60,000 to as many as 200,000.¹² This so-called Great Serbian Migration changed the proportion of Serbians and Albanians in Kosovo. The Albanians had now the overwhelming majority there, although it needs to be emphasized, too, that this process was slow and it comprised several phases. The settlement of the Albanian population took almost a century.¹³

In the title of our current chapter the term 'strict Turkish rule' was used with the aim of emphasising that after 1699 (the Peace Treaty of Karlóca), as opposed to the former Turkish opinion, the Turkish government already supported the policy of Islamisation. Huge masses, mostly Albanians, converted to Islam throughout the 18th century. It meant that in Kosovo the settlement of the Albanian population and Islamisation were closely interrelated. In addition to the waves of spontaneous settlement, the Turks openly supported those Albanians who had converted to Islam, encouraged their settlement in the regions of Kosovo and Western Macedonia, while the Orthodox Serbs were disfavoured

¹¹ L. GULYÁS, *Küzdelem a Kárpát-medencéért*, Budapest 2012, pp. 38–41.

¹² Z. ÁCS, *Nemzetiségek a történelmi Magyarországon*, Budapest 1986, p. 158; M KÖHEGYI, *A szerbek felköltözésének (1690) történelmi előzményei*, in: I. ZOMBORI (ed.), *A szerbek Magyarországon*, Szeged 1991, pp. 65–78, p. 72.

¹³ K. CSAPLÁR – A. SERES, *Délszláv-albán erőviszonyok az Oszmán Birodalomban*, in: *História*, No. 2, 2007, pp. 11–16.

The patriarchate of Ipek was gradually getting into a disastrous situation, both politically and financially. The Turkish Sultan eventually dissolved it and placed the Serbs of Kosovo under the authority of the patriarch of Constantinople.

Ethnic processes of the period in question led to serious conflicts between the Serbian and the Albanian population. These conflicts were further reinforced by the fact that the two nations in question belonged to different social groups of the hierarchical system. The Albanian population of Kosovo belonged to the Turkish power structure, meaning, that local authorities and landowners were mostly Muslims and Albanians; the Serbians on the other hand were mostly farmers.

It was not only the ethnic conditions that changed in this period. Kosovo's economy was also changing for the worse. At the end of the 17th century the exhausted mines had to be closed down and it led to economic recession. In the 18th century Kosovo was already part of the poor, underdeveloped regions, even by Balkan standards.

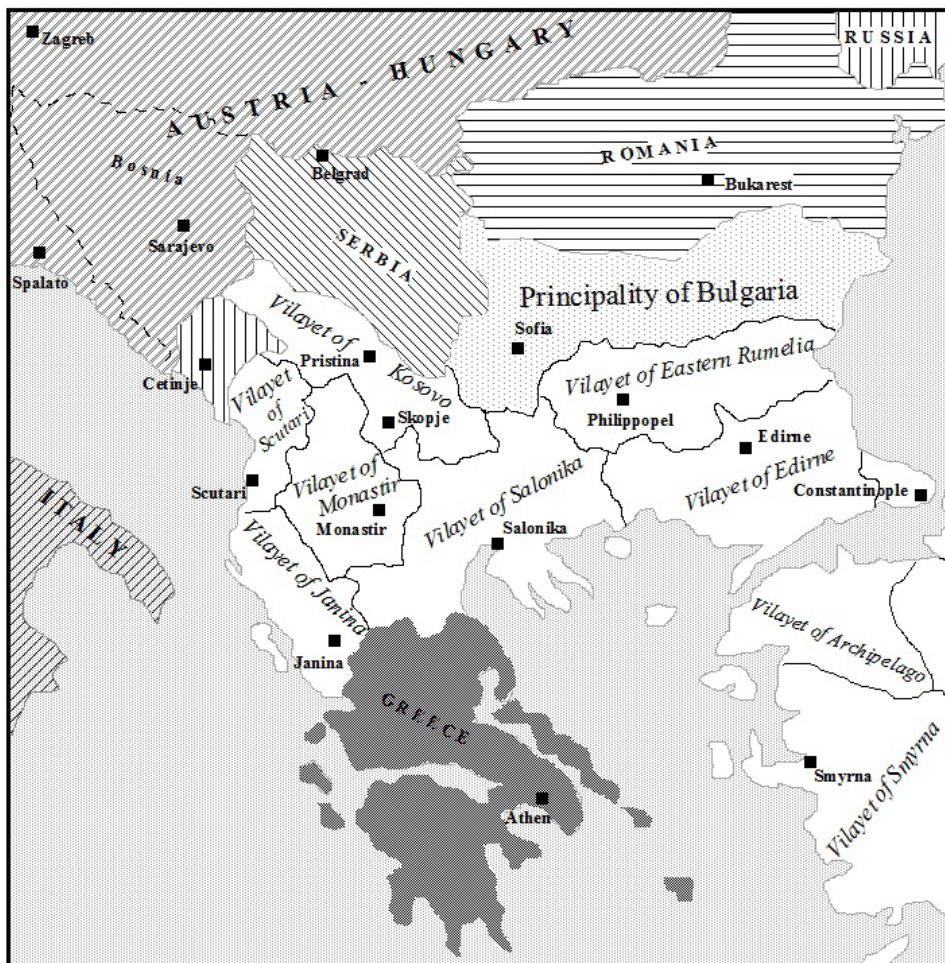
The Third Period: the Time of Permanent Conflicts (1804–1912)

In the Balkan region the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire was a slow process. The first problems occurred as early as the 18th century and approximately until the end of the 18th century there were permanent conflicts of economic and religious nature within the Empire. The nationalistic movements of the European areas of the Ottoman Empire began in 1804 with the uprising of the Serbians. From this period onward the relationship between the Ottoman Turks and the peoples of the Balkans was characterized by serious conflicts.¹⁴

It was in the early 19th century that the national sovereignty ambition appeared in the history of the peoples of the Balkans. The Turks were very good at managing conflicts and local ethnic problems in the period when one powerful empire stood against them. In the 19th century the British, the Russians the French and later the German and Italian ambitions to become

¹⁴ B. JELAVICH, *A Balkán története. 18. és 19. század*, Budapest 2000, pp. 17–50.

great powers also tried to support the nations of the Balkans. The focal points were the territorial demands of the would-be states. In the 18th century it was the Greek, the Montenegrin, the Serbian, the Romanian and the Bulgarian movements that were able to achieve some of their aims. They were able to bring about their own, more or less independent states. The Albanian nation, still shaping, was not yet successful in bringing about an Albanian state in the 19th century.¹⁵



Map 2: European part of Ottoman Empire at 1878

Source: The author's compilation

¹⁵ M. KITANICS, *Az albán történelem mérföldkövei- a kezdetektől a bipoláris világ széthullásáig*, in: *Balkán Füzetek*, No. 9, 2010, pp. 16–32.

What did this fact concretely mean in Kosovo? In the third period of Turkish rule in Kosovo the Albanians became the dominant ethnicity. Unfortunately data are scarce to support this idea. By the figures of the census of 1895–1896 the Muslims represented 53% of the total population of Kosovo. The Turkish at this time did not ask about ethnicity, consequently, all the Albanians were categorized as “Muslims”.¹⁶

The census of 1904 already included some ethnicity data. The ethnic breakdown of the 3.2 million inhabitants of the Vilayets of Kosovo, Manastir and Saloniki was as follows: 54.2% Turkish, 15.6% Bulgarian, 5.3% Serbian.¹⁷ When investigating these figures it is evident that the Albanians were simply considered Turkish.

Despite these previously detailed figures it can be stated that the province of Kosovo was dominated by Albanians at the end of the 19th century.

In the second half of the 19th century the Turkish political elite tried to solve ethnicity problems by administratively reorganising areas. In 1878 the European areas of the Empire were divided into seven large vilayets, one of which was the Vilayet of Kosovo with Pristina as its centre. This is the first time in history when Kosovo appears as an independent territorial and administrative unit. The Vilayet of Kosovo comprised a much larger area than the area of Kosovo today. It included areas from today’s Macedonia and included the town of Skopje as well. In addition to Kosovo there were three other vilayets – Janina, Manastir and Skodra – with a significantly high number of Albanians living there.

In this situation the Albanians joined forces and on June 10, 1878 they brought about the League of Prizren with the aim of uniting the Albanian-inhabited areas. The armed forces of the League seized power in Kosovo and Skopje in 1881. In April 1881 the League issued a Memorandum, which raised the issue of the unification of the four vilayets – Janina, Kosovo, Manastir and Skodra – inhabited by Albanians. In response the Turkish government took strict

¹⁶ CSAPLÁR – SERES, p. 11.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

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measures and sent an army of 20,000 into the revolting Albanian vilayets. The Turkish troops occupied the areas in question in no time and the leaders of the League were either executed or exiled to the remotest areas of the Empire.

Although the Turks eliminated the League of Prizren, the Albanian free troops, which had been recruited from the villages of Kosovo's rural areas, continued to fight with the local Turkish forces throughout the 1880s. It was in 1899 that the Albanians brought about a new organization, the League of Peć. It was their idea that an autonomous Albania be brought about within the Turkish Empire from Kosovo's four Albanian-inhabited vilayets. Since the League of Peć was soon to become known for its anti-Turkish views, the Sultan ordered its elimination as well.

In the early 1900s it was not only the Turkish state the Albanian movement had to fight with, but the Serbian and Macedonian movements, fighting for territories of their own, were also possible threats for them. The Serbian, the Macedonian and the Albanian national movements had the same territorial claims. In the area of the Vilayets of Kosovo and Manastir there were serious clashes between the Turkish armed forces and the Albanian, Serbian and Macedonian irregular troops. The so-called 'Young Turks' who got into power in 1908, tried to eliminate these free troops. In 1909 the Turkish Parliament passed a law on the elimination of free troops. It forbade the organization of these troops and the carrying of arms. If the leader of such a troop was caught, he was to be executed right away and the members of these groups were to be imprisoned. It was also possible to imprison their family members. This strict legislation failed to bring the expected results. In the spring of 1910 a major Albanian revolt broke out in Kosovo. The rebels occupied Skopje in August 1912 and forced the Turkish government to start negotiations with them. Then on November 12, 1912 the Albanian National Assembly proclaimed the independence of Albania in Valona.¹⁸

Parallely with these events the anti-Turkish Balkan League was brought about with Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece as its members, and in

¹⁸ GY. RÉTI, *Albánia sorsfordulói*, Budapest 2000, p 36.

October 1912, the First Balkan War broke out.¹⁹ The four member-states defeated the Turkish Empire in less than three weeks and in April 1913 a peace treaty was signed in London. The Turks agreed to giving over their European areas to the winners (except for Istanbul and the Straits). Albania became an independent state.

The members of the Balkan League turned against each other as early as the June of 1913. In the Second Balkan War the allied Serbian-Romanian-Greek-Turkish troops defeated Bulgaria.²⁰ This war ended with the Peace Treaty of Bucharest, signed in August 1913. As a result, the borders were once again redrawn. The new borders reflected the support systems of the great powers and the actual power relations between the individual states. The uncertainty of the affiliation of several areas led to serious new conflicts. Macedonia, Dobruja, Thracia and Kosovo were the areas in question. The area of the former Vilayet of Kosovo, despite the fact that the majority of its population was Albanian, was annexed to Serbia, and a smaller part of it to Montenegro.²¹

Conclusions

The Ottoman period of the history of Kosovo and its consequences can be summarised as follows: Kosovo, the nucleus of the Medieval Kingdom of Serbia, became a political, economic and religious centre under Turkish rule (1458–1913). By the end of the Turkish period it was already a province with dominantly Albanian population. In 1913 Kosovo became once again part of the Serbian state and this is why the Serbian-Albanian conflicts have remained unresolved in the 20th and 21st centuries as well.

Abstract

The aim of our research partnership was to outline the history of the area called Kosovo today, and to analyse its characteristics from the age of the Roman Empire up to now. This study is to introduce the results of the second phase of the research.

¹⁹ J. R. LAMPE, *Yugoslavia as a History. Twice there was a Country*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 89–92.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 94–96.

²¹ J. JUHÁSZ, *Volt egyszer egy Jugoszlávia*, Budapest 1999, p 13.

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In June 1458 the troops of the Ottoman Empire occupied the castle of Smederevo, the last Serbian-ruled area, and thus the Medieval state of the Serbs ceased to exist. Serbia – including Kosovo – was under Turkish rule for almost 500 years, until as late as 1913. The 454 years of the history of Ottoman Kosovo can be divided into three shorter periods. 1. The period of relatively peaceful coexistence (1458–1683). 2. The period of strict Turkish control (1686–1804). 3. The period of permanent conflicts (1804–1913).

Our paper is to give an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the above three periods, including political, economic and religious issues, ethnic processes, administrative changes and spatial processes.

Keywords

History of Kosovo; History of Balkan; History of Serbs; History of Albanians