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**Питър БЕНБОУ / Peter BENBOW**

**Рец. на: Дейвид Никол. Кръст и полумесец на Балканите: Отоманското завладяване на Югоизточна Европа. Барнсли, Южен Йоркшайър, Англия: Пен енд Сорд Букс Лимитид, 2010, 256 с.**

**Rec. ad: David Nicolle. Cross and Crescent in the Balkans: The Ottoman Conquest of Southeastern Europe. Barnsley, South Yorkshire, England: Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 2010, 256 pp.**

David Nicolle's *Cross and Crescent in the Balkans* is, with some major exceptions, organized chronologically, beginning with a brief description of the many Turkic and other Steppe peoples during the early Middle Ages and ending with some of the repercussions to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The topical concerns of Nicolle are varied, including military, political, and strategic events and trends, but there are also numerous excursions into the cultural history of Turks, Byzantines, and Arabs. The deeper structure of the study is controlled by two major events: the Battle of Nikopol in 1396 and the final conquest of the remnants of the Byzantine Empire. The author describes the structure and nature of Ottoman military organization and touches on similar topics regarding some of the Balkan peoples facing the expansion of the Turks. Of these, the Hungarians and Serbians receive the most consideration in the context of either their resistance to or cooperation with Turkish conquest. Bulgaria fails to receive any significant attention and is at best dealt with in a superficial and cursory fashion. Of the twenty-three chapters, three are devoted to the siege and conquest of Constantinople. Although Nicolle conveys to the reader a strong sense of the chaotic political and military situation in the Balkans during much of the medieval period, the interaction among Balkan peoples and states remains obscure.

Nicolle consistently employs an enumerative style without explaining the relative importance of his topics. Thus, long descriptive lists occur with frequency and even the well informed reader is sometimes left lost in a barrage of details. It is unclear what the monograph is attempting to be. The publisher's imprint characterizes it as "military" and this is confirmed to some degree by the author's choice of narrative emphasis. However, a goodly portion of the work is dedicated to cultural detours, whose relevance to advancing the narrative is unclear. In addition, these cultural notes rarely flatter the author's range of knowledge. Remarking on the advanced knowledge of Arab geographers, Nicolle notes that Tedisio d'Orio, "learned what so many Arab geographers already knew – namely that the world was spherical – a full two centuries years [sic] before Christopher Columbus" (29). Surprisingly, this statement perpetuates the old canard that Europeans before Columbus conceived of the Earth as flat, a view patently untrue, particularly of the educated classes. One may here remark as well that the text is full of typographical and other errors, which more careful editing either on the author's or publisher's part would have eliminated. Note the "centuries years" problem just quoted above. Other excursions into such fields as literature and art fail to raise the level of intellectual discourse. The unguarded reader discovers, in a discussion of art that, "Nevertheless Byzantine religious art remained the fountainhead for most western European religious art throughout the medieval period and indeed until the Renaissance" (160). The sweeping breadth of the claim coupled with its falsehood is difficult to overlook. One need only think of Gothic sculpture associated with cathedrals to see the error of this claim.

Such statements, render the reader skeptical of other generalizations about which the author might be more knowledgeable.

Two of the more interesting chapters (number three and four) examine the Crusader states in the Aegean, providing a wealth of detail about the state of fragmentation the region was experiencing. Examples include the Duchy of Athens under Catalan rule, (31) military iconography in the “Castle of St. Omer” in Thebes (31), and the strategies of the Knights Hospitallers during their conquest of Rhodes (41–42) contrasted to the strategies of the Knights Templars elsewhere in Europe (43). Yet this inherently interesting material is neither synthesized into any larger picture, nor clearly related to subsequent material. Chapters are often left hanging at their ends, with no conclusions or connection to the subsequent chapter. In one of the oddest parts of the study, chapter three “concludes” with the fact that the French *fleurs-de-lys* spread to indigenous Balkan leaders’ coats-of-arms (34). Clearly the flourishing of myriad small states played a role in the larger picture that, presumably, the author desires to paint. Yet the helpful vocabulary of international relations is lacking. It appears that Nicolle is trying to bring to the reader’s attention that the region was politically soft, that the Balkan Peninsula and the Aegean Basin were power vacuums and thus invited the first persistent, organized, and ideologically driven group or state, namely the Ottomans, to invade effectively.

Yet one waits for some explicit statement to this effect until chapter eight: “By the time the Ottoman threat became serious, the Balkans consisted of more than twenty separate states, all relatively small and some truly tiny. Many were also deadly rivals of one another and none were in a position to offer effective resistance to the approaching Ottoman armies” (73–74). There is hardly any gainsaying this assertion, but Nicolle’s statement is merely a nice articulation of a truism, one that might pass for insight should the author tell us why this was the case in a clear fashion. The reader looks for such clarity in vain. The rise of Serbia might have provided Balkan Christians with some power around which to rally against the growing might of the Ottomans, but readers familiar with the region know of the precipitous decline of that state as well. Nicolle alludes to this decline, but merely hints that the internal problems facing Serbia might have had a close connection to Serbian leaders’ choice to become and remain loyal vassals or supporters of the Turks. Yet these internal problems, which so closely affected the balance of power in the region, are neither described nor explained. Nicolle comments on one of the more famous of Serbian kings, “None strove harder to protect their people than Stefan Lazarevic, who is sometimes seen, most unjustly, as a traitor to the Christian cause.” And then in the next sentence, he notes that “Stefan Lazarevic was also the most loyal of the Ottoman ruler Bayezit I’s Balkan vassals and would tip the balance at the Battle of Nikopol” (73). That these two closely juxtaposed statements might be seen as contradictory is not unreasonable.

The central event in *Cross and Crescent* is the Battle of Nikopol, the events that led up to the intervention of some Western forces, and the consequences of the Christian loss to Bayezit I. Nicolle clearly has greater command of the material in the chapters about the intervention of the West and the nature of this central battle to the fate of the Balkan Peninsula in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The description of the involvement of the French with King Sigismund of Hungary and the attempt to overthrow the growing dominance of the Turks in the region is generally clear and interesting. The description of the tactics employed by both sides at Nikopol is easy to visualize and is told with a certain flair for dramatic narrative. The discussion of tactics and the flow of battle is Nicolle’s strong suit. Perhaps the author would have chosen well to devote these strengths to other significant confrontations such as the Battles of Varna and Second Kosovo. If narrative space was an issue, the author would have been well advised to delete Chapter 17 on the Ottomanization of Anatolia (an irrelevancy to the study) and concentrate his description and analysis on the Balkans.

Nicolle’s consideration of Bulgaria is superficial. The index cites four places in the text where Bulgaria or Bulgarians are mentioned. This is inaccurate. The study actually mentions the country and people in fourteen places, but only on page sixty-three does one find a full paragraph about the Bulgarian experience during the Ottoman invasions. Nicolle states that, “. . .Bulgaria country [sic] had enjoyed peace and a considerable economic revival as part of the Mongol ‘World Empire’ during the mid- and second-half of the thirteenth century. . .” (63) Bulgaria was never part of the Mongolian Empire, world-wide or otherwise. Nicolle mentions the fundamental problem of Bulgarian fragmentation but fails to explain its causes. This oversight might have easily been remedied by reference to J. Fine’s accessible study in English.<sup>1</sup> The reader’s interest is peeked but not satisfied by other suggestions as to the causes of Bulgarian weakness during the late fourteenth century

<sup>1</sup> See the treatment of Bulgaria during this period in **Fine, J.** 1987.

including heresies, depopulation, nomad raiding, and plagues (63). The author implies that after the Ottoman conquest of Plovdiv sporadic resistance by aristocratic remnants exacerbated the further loss of Bulgarian autonomy and that the situation of the average Bulgarian peasant improved under Ottoman hegemony (63). It would have been interesting if the author had substantiated such claims regarding the national peasantry's well-being during pre- and post-Conquest eras. Whether the common Bulgarian, Serbian, or Hungarian man was better off under national or Ottoman overlordship is a much exercised question.<sup>2</sup> Broad generalizations such as we find in Nicolle's study fail to enlighten.

Constantinople's fall to the Turks in 1453, as iconographic as it is both from an eastern and western perspective, rightly receives Nicolle's attention, yet there are many published descriptions of the military details of this siege. The narrative offered here is at times unclear and confusing, a problem exacerbated by the lack of maps and diagrams. The centrality of artillery to the success of the Turks is not fully fleshed out. The nature and relationship of inner and outer walls is never made clear. These are a few of the problems which beset Chapters 18 through 20. The question of identifying and understanding the last acts of Emperor Constantine XI has rightly attracted much scholarly attention. Unfortunately, Nicolle's analysis fails to effectively contribute to the issue. Nicolle offers the reader his opinion but fails to explain why historians ought to consider his interpretation more convincing than another. Consideration of this defect leads one to a broader one, namely, the universal lack of clear documentation of the descriptions, analyses, and claims found in this study. Only one footnote is to be found in *Cross and Crescent* on the final page (244). Given that a singular note appears at all, leads one to speculate that others could have been employed, should the author or editors have deemed it necessary. That no documentation substantiates the text, is catastrophic to the study's credibility and usefulness to historians or other scholars. In addition, the bibliography is skeletal and fails to include basic works essential to an understanding of the period such as John V. A. Fine's foundational study, *The Early and Late Medieval Balkans*.<sup>3</sup> The interested reader will also look in vain for works produced by scholars within the Balkan national traditions themselves. The four maps offered as guides to the historical geography of the period are woefully inadequate to the task of clarifying the shifting political and military sands of the region. One is forced to look elsewhere for such visual assistance. There is no conclusion as such. The reader is left on the final page with an observation on raiding in frontier zones. The expectation of an integrated and broad conclusion is justified by the wide range of topics considered. The fundamental problem *Cross and Crescent* faces, above and beyond the serious question of documentation, is one of purpose. Is Nicolle attempting a general history of the region and period, a military history, or an investigation of the relationship between military and cultural history? That the author's general intent is unclear contributes to *Cross and Crescent's* negligible utility as a contribution to scholarship or as a vehicle for the dissemination of historical knowledge among the educated public.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the discussion in **Adanir, F.** 1989.

<sup>3</sup> For the standard general history in English refer to **Fine, J.** 1987.