

Miranda Vickers & James Pettifer: **Albania, from anarchy to Balkan identity.** London: Hurst and Co. 1997. ISBN 1-85065-290-2. xii + 324 pp.

*Albania, from anarchy to Balkan identity* offers, for the first time in any language, a comprehensive, detailed and reliable survey of historical, political, economic and cultural developments in Albania from the collapse of the Communist dictatorship ca. 1990 to early 1997. Its two British authors, both with excellent credentials in contemporary Albanian studies, have combined their talents to create a unique and highly recommended volume. Miranda Vickers, author of perhaps the best history of Albania ever written in English, *The Albanians, a short history* (London 1995), is a historian of the Balkans and a regular contributor to newspapers and periodicals on Albanian affairs. James Pettifer, author of *The Greeks, land and people since the war* (London 1993) and *Blue guide Albania* (London 1994, 2nd edit. 1996), still the best guide book of Albania to date, is Visiting Professor at the Institute of Balkan Studies in Thessalonika and a Senior Associate member of St Anthony's College in Oxford, and has written much on political affairs in the southern Balkans.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters, the first four of which are devoted to the final demise of the hardline Stalinist regime set up by Enver Hoxha at the end of the Second World War and to the political changes which culminated in the first pluralist elections on 31 March 1991. Detailed coverage is given to the circumstances surrounding the creation of the first real political parties in the country and to the figures who came to lead them.

Chapter 5 begins with *The Democratic Party Victory* under Sali Berisha in the elections of 22 March 1992. The DP took over power at an extremely bleak period of time in Albanian history, even by Albanian standards. The economy was in ruins and no satisfactory new structures, be they political, social or economic, had been created to help the country on its way back to Europe. With much assistance from U.S. Ambassador, William Ryerson, the alleged power behind the throne, Berisha began to consolidate his power base. Of the new Albanian leader, we learn, "he is shrewd, with an impulsive streak, a workaholic reluctant to delegate, and has an unfaltering faith in the capacity of the DP under his leadership to solve all of Albania's problems" (p. 82). The formation of the first DP government was concomitant with initial and as yet somewhat unclear factional divisions within the party which led to the first open split in the summer of 1992, to subsequent purges and to increasingly obvious signs of authoritarianism. "Although much has yet to emerge about what happened between Berisha and his previous political allies during these months, they marked a major retreat from the notion of a functioning parliamentary democracy" (p. 94)... "It is ironic that the United States was the first Western country to become aware of the dangers of the Berisha presidency, after it had done so much to put him in place. It was equally ironic that the EC countries did not understand that political freedom was being continuously eroded under the same regime" (p. 95).

The thread of internal political developments in Albania is interrupted in the following chapters which turn to an analysis of the cultural and social impact of the dramatic changes Albania and neighbouring lands were undergoing. Chapter 6 concentrates on *The Revival of Religion* with an informed and objective treatment of the reestablishment of the Bektashi, Sunni Muslim, Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities. The war waged by fundamentalist Protestant missionaries, including "wholesome-looking American evangelists... with a deep southern drawl," is described not without some humour, as are the incredulous reactions and awestruck silence of the innocent Albanians. *Social and Cultural Changes* in chapter 7 throw light on the erratic developments in intellectual and cultural life, which had grown extremely dull after decades of Stalinist isolation and was now being replaced lock, stock and barrel by the cheapest and most superficial elements of Western culture in the form of: "brash new cafés... with their gaudy Coca-Cola umbrellas and raucous

Western music, which sold only Western drinks” (p. 123). The crime wave, which has been one of the worst results of the implosion of social and national identity, is exemplified by the following disturbing instance: “In 1992 the Associated Press correspondent Liam McDowell was driving near Fier... crashed the car and hit his head in the process. A crowd then assembled and started to strip him of his clothing and the car of all its equipment. In trying to resist he gained more cuts and bruises before being picked up by a passing motorist and taken to the outskirts of Tirana, at which point the driver stopped the car in a wood and demanded \$600 at knife point. Having managed to convince the man that he had nothing left, the correspondent got away and had to walk into town” (p. 130). Caveat peregrinus. Blood feuding, the rise in organized crime, family and women are also dealt with at length in the context of these developments.

Chapter 8 provides a well-presented introduction to the problem of *Kosova and the Question of National Unification* and chapter 9 delves into *The Other National Question: Macedonia and Montenegro*. Particularly detailed is coverage given to the very difficult position of the Albanian minority in the Republic of Macedonia, who make up 25-30% of the population. The apartheid faced by the Albanians there, though paling in comparison to their discrimination at the hands of the Serbs in Kosova, is amply illustrated by one statistic alone. Of the 22,994 students allowed to register at universities in Macedonia in 1992, there were only 386 Albanians (p. 174). That Pettifer, author of the chapter on Macedonia, has close ties with Greece can be inferred from his preference for terms such as the ‘Skopje government’ and ‘FYROM’ rather than Macedonia (a word which always appears in quotation marks), not to mention minor details like his usage of the Greek measurement *stremma* for the normal Albanian term *dylm* (p. 25). Treatment of the material is nonetheless objective and convincing.

Particularly informative is chapter 10 on *Ethnic Minorities in Albania after Communism*, in which Pettifer provides a detailed account of the situation of the Greek minority in southern Albania and of Greco-Albanian political relations over the past decade. Other ethnic groups are given more than passing coverage, too: the Vlachs, the Roma (Gypsies), the Jews, the Slavs and the Armenians in Albania, as well as the Albanian Chams from northern Greece. Here again, treatment of this delicate issue, Balkan minorities, is balanced and rational, and is sufficient to take the wind out of the sails of extremists who would dramatize the situation.

Chapter 11, which concentrates on Albania’s *International Relations and Defence* from the Hoxha period to the present day, is followed by three concluding chapters chronicling Albanian political history from 1993 to 1996, the period which marked the decay and final collapse of Albania’s fledgling democracy. Although many factors are discussed and evaluated, much of the blame is attributed to President Berisha personally. “Another important difficulty was the personality of the President, where his strong Tropoja roots and traditional Gheg qualities embody strength, courage and steadfastness but also a tendency to dogmatic authoritarianism and a deep suspicion of opposition” (p. 228). The popular rejection of the Constitution in the referendum of November 1994, which in actual fact was more a rejection of Sali Berisha as president, marked the rapid deterioration of political relations and of the state of law. “Many of the failings manifested by the DP government have stemmed from the intolerant and anti-pluralistic mentality of many DP politicians, who received their political education during the most intellectually bankrupt and arid period of Albanian communism” (p. 267). The final chapter 14 on *The May 1996 elections and the future* provides a circumspect analysis of the scandalous elections of that year. The authors note poignantly: “Albania’s slow drive towards democracy had been put sharply into reverse” (p. 288).

Unfortunately the book terminates in January 1997, two months before the nadir was to be reached during the horrifying, and yet for the foreign observer fascinating week in

March 1997 when the whole country self-destructed politically, economically, socially and morally. One can only hope that a new volume is in the making, for which one could suggest the appropriate title “Albania II, from Balkan identity to anarchy”.

The present volume, *Albania, from anarchy to a Balkan identity*, can be recommended at any rate without reservations as a lucid, informative and well-balanced account of the most recent period of Albanian history. The two authors are exceptionally well informed about the realities of Albanian life and, as such, allow the reader to glimpse behind the country’s often so impervious facade. Up to the present, many books on Albanian affairs published in Britain have given proof of little more than a well-meaning dilettantism. Vickers and Pettifer have now shown that this age has passed.

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