

Paramilitarism in the Balkans: Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania, 1917–1924. By Dmtitar Tasić. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 288 pp.

Still hungover from the flurry of recent publications inspired by the centennials of various historical milestones in Balkan and European history, scholars of the region should not get complacent and fail to notice Dmtitar Tasić's first English-language monograph. Taking on the topic of Balkan paramilitarism, vastly under-researched until a decade ago, Tasić provides readers with the first comprehensive comparative study of paramilitarism in the region, offering insights on its nature and development beyond both the three case studies of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania and the temporal framework of 1917–1924. His book, part of the impressive series *The Greater War 1912–1923*, edited by Robert Gerwarth, is a much-needed addition to a growing body of publications on previously uncharted aspects of World War I and its legacy.

Tasić's book fits well within the series' overall framework, which seeks to question the conventional spatial and chronological dimension of the conflict that has far too long been associated primarily if not exclusively with the iconic battlefields at Verdun, the Somme, and Ypres between 1914–1918. In lieu of the soldiers' debilitating experiences in the trenches of Western Europe, Tasić introduces the bizarre story of Balkan paramilitaries, who can be seen as liminal figures, in part relics of the bygone age of Eric Hobsbawm's primitive rebels, in part harbingers of the murderous bureaucrat that Hannah Arendt saw in Eichmann. Perhaps no one exemplifies better this unlikely combination of romantic glory and pragmatic terror than Ivan (Vancho) Mihailov, the interwar leader of the right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). Tasić labels him a "revolutionary-bureaucrat," "typical office style suit-up activist with no previous experience in guerrilla warfare," yet posing "in full *komitaji* outfit" to lay claim to the rich heritage of classical Balkan guerrillas from the period of national liberation and nation-building (p.171). The story of figures like Mihailov and the Serb/Yugoslav veteran *chetnik* leader Kosta Pećanac fill the pages of the book, as Tasić sees their life trajectories as indicative of the thorough shift of Balkan societies towards modernity, a shift that was sped up by the experiences of the Great War.

To his credit, Tasić manages to intertwine those stories in a narrative which moves among analyses of events, individuals, organizations, structures, and processes. His book begins at the dawn of Balkan modernity, i.e., the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when national standing armies

had just begun to appear in the recently established Balkan nation states and displace irregulars. Borrowing Robert Gerwarth and John Horne's definition of paramilitaries as "military or quasi-military organizations and practices that either expanded or replaced the activities of conventional military formations" (p.1), Tasić argues that, unlike in most other parts of Europe, the Balkan culture of paramilitarism was not a consequence of the Great War's violence and the brutalization of soldiers, but had a much longer pedigree going back to the Ottoman period. The topic of paramilitarism's origins in the region is further explored in Chapter 1, which takes us through the rise of paramilitaries in the decades of struggle against the declining Ottoman Empire and the subsequent clash of the nation-building projects of its successor states. The formative years of Balkan paramilitaries, as Tasić claims, came in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when Ottoman Macedonia became the battleground of these competing state projects. This borderland region was where irregular units of Serbian *chetniks*, Bulgarian *komitajis*, Greek *andartes*, and, later, Albanian *kachaks* fought the Ottoman army and one another in the so-called Macedonian Struggle and the subsequent Balkan Wars and World War I. The participation of these guerrilla bands alongside the standing armies enshrined their place in the national mythology of the respective states and also ensured that they would continue to play prominent roles in the postbellum.

Chapters 2–5 deal with the inability of participants in almost incessant warfare for around a decade to demobilize and peacefully reintegrate into their societies. The turbulent local and international postwar situation certainly did not help in the process. Political and economic instability, bitter territorial disputes, and revanchism as well as the influx of new paramilitary forces such as the Reds and the Whites in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution left little room for general pacification. On the contrary, the blurred line between soldiers, irregular combatants, and civilians from the war years spread the paramilitary culture of violence beyond its immediate practitioners. Kosovo, Albania, and the cross-border region of Macedonia became hotbeds of paramilitary violence which further destabilized relatively weak states, allowing for drastic political changes, such as the Bulgarian coup d'état of 1923 and repeated political turbulence in Albania. Finally, the last two chapters and the conclusion reveal the life trajectories of various Balkan paramilitary individuals and organizations as well as the long-term legacies of the phenomenon of paramilitarism which, according to Tasić, can be clearly seen as late as the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Tasić is quick to dispel simplistic arguments which suggest that one can draw a straight line

from the Serbian *chetniks* to the genocidal actions of 1990s paramilitaries such as Arkan's Tigers, but he still concludes that the persistence of paramilitarism in the region "speaks of strong legacies of classic Balkan paramilitarism and of its potential to appear again and again with similar outcomes despite different historical, political and ideological contexts" (p.241).

Naturally, such an ambitious research project, which seeks to encompass three case studies and draw wide-reaching conclusions based on them concerning the nature of paramilitarism in the region, has some shortcomings. Tasić's meticulous research in the Serb/Yugoslav archives and his sufficient command of both primary and secondary sources on the Bulgarian case cannot conceal the fact that Albania and Kosovo are mainly covered on the basis of secondary literature in Serbian and English. On a more conceptual level, Tasić pays some attention to paramilitaries' ability to establish their own kind of social order, most notably in the case of the IMRO's "state within the state" in Pirin, Macedonia, but he would benefit from considering the recent work of Spyros Tsoutsoumpis, who has aptly revealed the extent to which paramilitaries' administering potential might have been crucial to their success within their respective local communities. In a similar vein, Keith Brown and İpek Yosmaoğlu, who have both written on the Macedonian struggle, have explored paramilitary violence from a more socio-anthropological perspective, linking the topic of paramilitarism to the larger field of political violence, as also seen in the work of Stathis Kalyvas. The works of these scholars could further widen Tasić's perspective. Finally, it is a shame that the publisher did not invest more efforts into editing the manuscript. There are a few repetitions. For instance, the background stories of several prominent paramilitaries are given in multiple times in different chapters. Furthermore, the occasional typos and some questionable grammatical and linguistic choices could have been reduced to a minimum had the text, which otherwise reads quite easily, been more carefully checked.

Despite these minor flaws or rather potential further expansions, Tasić's book should unquestionably be considered an achievement. Methodologically and theoretically sound, the book will be a rich source of information and insights for readers with an interest in paramilitarism and/or Balkan military and political history.

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