

THE ROOTS OF BALKANIZATION



Eastern Europe C.E. 500–1500

ION GRUMEZA

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Ion Grumeza

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Cover photo: Interior of Hagia Sophia of Constantinople,
an Orthodox basilica until 1453, when it became Ayasofya,
a mosque; today it is a museum in Istanbul. Source:
Photo taken by author in 2005.

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Preface

The term “Balkan powder keg” was introduced at the beginning of the last century, and the word “Balkanization” appeared after the Balkan wars of 1912-1913, to describe the ethnic violence, political confusion, and arbitrary re-division of lands into new countries with unhappy people of different origins, culture, and religion. It was at that point that small nations declared themselves “great” by usurping neighboring lands, and major global powers became involved in nationalistic disputes they did not understand. Once again, as has happened throughout the history of the Balkans, borders shifted, often separating homogeneous ethnic groups against their will. The relentless problems this causes continue to be reflected in today’s geopolitics.

The idea for a book on *The Roots of Balkanization* came to me during the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia, when five ethnically diverse groups of people with three major religions disputed frontiers and claimed lands, such as the Kosovo area. NATO air strikes and the punishment of modern warlords enforced a “peace” not too different from that imposed by Ottoman raids in the past, and did little to solve problems deeply rooted in medieval Balkan history. Inherited fears, suspicion, revenge, and religious fanaticism are as alive and volatile in this area today as they were hundreds of years ago, all due to the legacy of Balkanization. To turn the clock back and clarify that legacy means to revive what was written on the subject. However, many scholars have focused on specific events, personalities, or even words, and missed the larger, more obvious picture of human endeavors. Furthermore, history books on this subject were often written from the perspective of the “eye of the beholder.”

In my case, my Romanian heritage brings with it certain perspectives of its own—the inheritance of many successive generations who still lived in the middle of Eastern Europe. Since I am neither Albanian, Greek, nor Hungarian,

nor do I belong to any branch of the Slavic race, I consider myself politically neutral and capable of providing a dispassionate historical account of events. However, I do periodically inject personal observations to clarify something that may be ambiguous, support a probability, oppose a common but erroneous viewpoint, and offer a conclusion. Mainly, I have tried diligently to shed more light on centuries of bitter controversy regarding who was who and who did what. The reader will note that some events and information overlap from chapter to chapter; this is because the same material is susceptible to being understood from diverse points of view. The book aims to be concise and to the point, and was written with students in mind. However, the reader should note that each page contains information so condensed that it could easily be the subject of a chapter or even another book.

Occasionally, I share my fascination with the role of accidents and their effects on history. In doing research, I am always excited to stumble over historical accidents or blunders and to examine their unexpected effects, especially if they have been overlooked by other historians. To get beyond accidental coincidence represents to me a different approach to the study of history. Doing so can provide answers to the question of what really happened. What does the surviving evidence the artifacts, battlegrounds, excavations, etc., tell me about how to clarify or change whatever written records may exist? Luckily, when it comes to the Balkans, there is much to be learned from the museums and churches that display austere Byzantine mosaics, iconographic paintings, and aged statues. Also, I routinely pay detailed attention to information relating to wars, since they shape the history of any nation. If allowed, I would gratefully touch the masterfully made shining armor, fine swords, primitive cannons, and other weapons of those times, just to feel their cold steel. If only these objects could speak, what stories they would tell! Visiting historical battlefields, archeological sites, or monuments stirs up questions in me: "What if I were there?" Standing in the middle of Hagia Sophia, I felt all the saints looking at me as I asked, "What really happened here?" This powerful need to re-live past events on a metaphysical level has inspired me to undertake research into the entangled records of the Balkanian world, a world much tempered by the vagaries of history.

The most provocative challenge of all rests in the old manuscripts which often provide confusing material concerning the process of Balkanization. Often one must look elsewhere for better clues. An example is the account of historian Niketas Choniates who called the Turks, Persians; Hungarians, Paiones; the Serbs, Triballoi; and the Vlachs, Mysians (those living in, the former Dacia Moesia). To him, French and Germans had interchangeable names and could collectively be called Latins; the Greeks he called Romans. Another example is the controversy about the famous General Ioan/Iancu de Hunedoara, a.k.a.

John/Janos Hunyadi and Ioannus Corvinu, who is claimed by at least three nationalities and whose name is spelled in at least fifteen ways in different languages. Moreover, each of his military defeats was considered a victory by his people, and his sudden death was blamed for anything that subsequently went wrong in his country.

The most unreliable and even deceptive documents I encountered in this inquiry into the historic processes of Balkanization were texts from Communist authors. They were steeped in bias and propaganda and deliberately misread sources and revised history. Documents from the Stalinist Era claim that the Slavs originated and created everything in Eastern Europe. Incorrectly dated and misnamed archeological sites were provided as evidence for this, alongside distorted historiographies. Some historians deliberately misinterpreted documents or took snippets and quotes out of context; their subsequent speculations are saturated with romantic and chauvinistic views designed to please certain readers, or, better put, leaders.

The many kings and emperors who ruled over Eastern European lands they never saw, together with their complicated family trees and Shakespearean intrigues, present another challenge. Inaccuracy and biased judgments also fill these historical records. Small nations with modest pasts created earthshaking legends for themselves in an effort to prove their importance. Skirmishes that had unclear winners were acclaimed as glorious wars won by each participant, both or all of whom grotesquely inflated the number of attacking enemy soldiers. In many instances, an ethnic group claimed its right to a patch of land that was also claimed by its neighbor—with the identical pathos and fabricated proof.

Equally puzzling were the centuries-old theories and legends, often inaccurate from the beginning, which were blindly accepted and still go unchallenged today. The Bulgarians and Hungarians, for example, consider ancient and Roman archeological sites to be part of their heritage, even though they arrived in Europe relatively late and had no real connection to that distant past. The Serbians include Emperor Trajan in their legends as “Tsar Troyan,” an obvious myth with no historical validity. The Romans could never have occupied those nations because they did not exist at that time. Many discoveries and other sources can throw a confusing light on such matters of dispute, but it can also happen that the results are once again shown to be false.

Such myriad points of historical confusion pose a serious problem when it comes to understanding modern Eastern Europe. There is, for example, the linguistic issue: the Slovakians can barely understand the Czechs, even though they recently belonged to the same country, but the Czechs understand the Poles to some extent. The Poles, however, do not understand the Croats, who scarcely understand the Serbs, and none of them understands the

Slovenians, who have a population of two million who speak at least thirty major dialects. The language of the Bulgarians has nothing in common with that of the Hungarians and Albanians, and all these languages are different from Greek and Turkish. In the midst of all of this, it is the Romanians alone who speak a Latin dialect. The languages of the Byelorussians, Russians, and Ukrainians are Slavic in origin, similar but distinct, while the Macedonians speak the languages of the nations that divided them, and not that of Alexander the Great. Many Slavic peoples claim different ancestors—northern and southern Slavs with east and west Slavic languages. And, the Jews and Gypsies have their own tongue that originated in the Near and Far East; Yiddish is rooted in German.

Furthermore, the English spelling of any names from the above mentioned nations are so bastardized that they can scarcely be linked to their original. The Latin alphabet with modified letters and diagraphs (two joined letters), intended to reflect phonetics, is used by the Romanians, Slovenians, Croatians (who still use Glagolitic writing), some of the Bosnians, Czechs, Hungarians, and the Turks. Related to this are Polish, which lacks three Latin letters, and Albanian, which is based on the Tosk dialect; both use extra letter combinations. The Cyrillic alphabet is used by the Belarus, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Ukrainians, Russians, and Serbians (who also sometimes use the Roman alphabet); the Greeks alone use their own alphabet. To complicate matters still further, two major religions with many denominations—Christianity and Islam—divide the ethnic groups in Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro. There are also two distant states that have confusingly similar names—Slavonia and Slovenia, and they use different dialects that contain similar sounds.

Maps of the medieval era found in old documents, atlases, and books, reveal amazing discrepancies when it comes to things like the locations of different tribal federations, directions of migration, first settlements, areas circumscribed by newly founded states, the size of empires, and shifts in borders at various points in history. Little attention has been given to the historical timeline and the geographic configuration of the Balkan states, whose land and accessibility ultimately united or separated cultures and societies. Borders often incorporated populations that did not belong within them, and flags represented nationalities with conflicting ethnicities. All of this having been said, I have done my best to evaluate the topography of the past and have sought to create maps that are illustrative of the texts available for a specific historical era.

As I write these lines, the Macedonians are living in different Balkan countries, and much of the independent Republic of Macedonia has been claimed by Greece. When the Skopje airport was named after Alexander the Great

and displayed his sculptured head, the Greeks were outraged; but they were even more angered when they learned that a seventy-foot statue of the ancient emperor would be placed in the middle of the Macedonian capital. There is an international campaign underway to stop the project of these “Slavic-speaking people.” It is felt that they have no right to glorify someone whom the Greeks consider their legendary hero—never mind that young Alexander did not speak Greek, he was banned from the Olympic Games, and the Albanians also claim him.

Moreover, the Hungarians believe they have a right to own what is now Transylvania, the land of Dacians which was once occupied by the Romans. Since then, the Daco-Romans and their offshoots have served as a genetic common denominator for each new nation that was formed in the Balkans. Today it is estimated that millions of their descendents, named Vlachs, Aromanians, and others, speak dialects of the Romanian language and live outside of the modern Romanian state in Eastern Europe. Other minorities across Eastern Europe have shared the same destinies.

How to write about arguments that need no proof and explain a controversy that supposedly was settled many times? Historians have all too often treated this as a subject that has been conclusively debated, with questions it raises as having been conclusively. Countless websites display a vast amount of material with intriguing speculations based on minor findings. Each nation tries to look better than the next, and the information is contradictory at best. The tendency to conform and write what is today considered politically correct is as damaging to the historical record as are egocentrism and revisionism. What is certain is that governments, with their rulers, presidents, and leaders, come and go; borders are re-drawn; economies thrive and suffer. But human nature has changed very little over the past one thousand years. People remember their heritage, identifying with specific habits and a precise land that may be named differently at different times. With this identity comes a way of relating to others, to “outsiders,” be they the barbarians of the past or the “foreigners” and equally unwanted “neighbors” of the present. This ethnic amalgam, and overall nightmarish human situation that no one can solve, is called Balkanization.

In what follows I aim to fill a gap with authoritative material on how the process of Balkanization came about, to separate fact from fiction and trace the patterns of ethnic and cultural life that originated fifteen centuries ago, but renew themselves in each successive generation, resulting in today’s Balkan demographics with its diverse political and socioeconomic dynamics.

A Note to the Reader

In this book I use the term Balkans for the Balkan Peninsula and its population up to the Danube River. “Balkanians” include the Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Romanians, who belong to Eastern Europe along with nations once located beyond the Iron Curtain—Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. I refer to Bulgars as the forefathers of modern Bulgarians and use the term “Serbs” for the earlier Serbians. To simplify nomenclature, I call the future Ukrainians and Kiev Rus “Russians”; sometimes I include under the “Turks” groups of Arabs, Moors, Saracens, and Seljuks—all Muslims who in later time periods I call “Ottomans.” I use the term Magyars for the people who preceded the Hungarians, who, from the year 1000 onward, became the *Natio Hungarica*.

The Daco-Romans who preceded the Romanians were named Wallachians, Wallachs, Valachs, Valachians, Valahians, Valahi, Vlachians, Vlachs, Vlahs, Vlasi, Vasi, Vlachoï, Vlachs, Blahi, and Olahs by Hungarians; Volohoi by the Slavs; and Volohi by Russians. To make a clear distinction between them, I use the term “Wallachians” for people north of the Danube, in Muntenia, Oltenia, Dobrodjua, Moldavia, and Transylvania; and “Vlachs” for people living south of the Danube in many Vlachian territories of the Balkan Peninsula and Eastern Europe. Instead of the various names of Thessalonika, Saloniki, Salonica, Solun, Sărună (in Aromanian), Salonic (Latin), Selanik (Turkish), I use the traditional name of Thessaloniki for the Greek metropolis.

The names of individuals can likewise be confusing. For example, Stefan, Stephan, or Stephen is equivalent to Istvan in Hungarian; Ioan, Iancu, Ivan, and Jovan, are John in English. For clarity, I use English names as often as possible. I chose the shorter spelling of Mehmed II and not the longer versions of Mohammed, Muhammed, Mohammad, Muhamet, and others.

In Eastern Europe each letter (including vowels) represents one basic sound and *w* is pronounced *v*. The word “the” does not exist. I try to avoid using Balkan letters, such as *ã, â, î*, etc., replacing them with *a* and *i*, and *č* with *ch*, *ș* with *sh*, *ț* with *ts*, etc., using English spelling that resembles the sound.

Because the history of the Balkans is so vast, I have limited myself to covering the characters and events that relate to the specific topic of this book. This book should not be read as a chronology of events, since each chapter has its own; an effort was made to include chronological milestones. Unless specified, all dates refer to Common Era.

Introduction

This study traces the creation of the present Balkan nations and examines their influence on Eastern Europe. It investigates the origins of specific peoples and their habits and traditions, as well as the national identities that shaped the alliances and rivalries that ultimately produced demographic and historical changes. It takes a fresh look at the nomadic tribes who for centuries roamed the vast lands of Eurasia until they found the trade routes that connected Sarmatia and Scythia with the riches of the Roman Empire, and then proceeded westward. Pushing each other in all directions, these migratory peoples moved toward the Danube River, which marked the northern border of prosperous settlements to be sacked. Although their aim was Rome, many of these hordes did not go that far; instead, they stormed Adrianople, Constantinople, and other Byzantine megalopolises.

After the Roman Empire fell, a power vacuum was created in Eastern Europe: no other force was available to maintain orderly borders or keep barbarians away. For the next five hundred years, the Danube and the Balkan lands trembled under the hooves of raiders on galloping horses who were in search of plunder and a place of their own. Often, native populations narrowly escaped annihilation, seeking shelter in mountains and leaving behind fertile fields to be occupied by the non-farming Avars, Cumans, Bulgars, Magyars, Serbs, and other Asiatic mega-tribes. Their territorial ambitions drove them to destroy everything in their path—particularly regions undefended by the shrinking and militarily enfeebled Byzantine Empire.

The period of the rise of the Byzantine Empire (C.E. 500 to 1000) was plagued by countless destructive events at all levels, and emperors from Constantinople tried in vain to maintain their authority by playing the invading tribes off against each other, employing mercenary armies to force them back, bribing them, and calling on the power of the Orthodox Church to pacify

them. During this time the future nations of Russians and Turks were testing their military might by attacking the overstretched empire.

In 800, Charlemagne tried to restore the stability of Western Europe by creating the Holy Roman Empire. To the East, the Byzantine Empire, which had been shaken by royal feuds, was not strong enough to discipline the swarms of savage tribes pillaging the remainder of the Balkans. Meanwhile, Slavic tribes crossed the Oder River, and Bulgarians conquered what is today Sofia. Roughly one hundred years later, Germany was invaded by the Hungarians and their Magyar brethren who ravaged the Moravian Empire and attacked Italy. Eventually, the Western nations succeeded in chasing the barbarians back into Eastern Europe, where they displaced long established populations and made them captives in their own land.

Since they were unable to venture beyond the German borders, the weakly defended Balkan Peninsula was an ideal place for the invading hordes to settle. The region appealed to their needs. The land was, however, occupied by indigenous populations ruled by the Eastern Roman Empire, and so already saturated with a mix of people. Not surprisingly, bloody conflicts erupted between the foreign invaders and the ancient settlers, such as the Albanians, Daco-Romans, Dalmatians, Macedonians, and Greeks. The Byzantine Empire aimed to continue the civic and political tradition of the Roman Empire regarding colonization of the barbarians, who imposed their Stone Age habits and made land claims based on their ability to destroy civilized settlements. The problem was that now the barbarians, not the Romans, were the colonizers, and migration went from east to west, and not the reverse. The larger result was the desperate exodus of certain populations and a reshuffling of Balkan values and traditions into a new blend of Balkanians. More invaders thundered across Eastern Europe, and none of these groups was willing to return to Asia; their continuing presence created one calamity after another, making the Dark Ages darker and more apocalyptic. This was roughly the state of affairs in Eastern Europe at the end of the first millennium.

The next five centuries were marked by the crusaders' traversal of the Balkans. Their ill-fated religious campaigns made it possible for the Ottoman armies to move as far west as the straits of the Bosphorus, just hundreds of yards from Constantinople. Still another Mongolian invasion, that of the Golden Horde, brought back memories of Attila the Hun; it almost destroyed the Turks in Asia and annihilated the power of Magyars and Slavs in Europe, thus unwittingly resulting in Constantinople's being spared. However, approximately one hundred years later, the Turks occupied Gallipoli and so ensured Ottoman access to Eastern Europe; they brought with them both Gypsies and the Black Plague. In 1366, Adrianople became the capital of the

Turkish-occupied Balkans, and soon the crescent flags came to be reflected in the waters of the Danube.

With barbarian raids, the doomed crusades, and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, came mass rape. This created whole new populations who then became established in Eastern Europe. In no other part of the world did so many ethnic groups fight so many battles and suffer so many religious and social changes over such a short period of time and on a finite amount of land. By the end of the fifteenth century, all the main players in this human drama were in place to confront the rest of history. They contributed to the irreversible phenomenon of Balkanization, which is the subject of this volume.

The Balkan region was never a harmonious melting pot. Rather, from the very beginning, it was a boiling cauldron of ethnic rivalries. The wars and revolutions that took place there never solved anything; to the contrary, they merely generated new sets of conflicts. Nationalities were kept apart by their distinctive cultural characteristics and ferocious territorialism. The latter was fed by the bad blood of perpetual feuds, as well as by legends about the glorious past—legends that were often based merely on exaggerated myths. Still, many of the genetically diverse groups came to co-exist under the powerful cross of the Orthodox Church. They all hoped to share a common ethic and tried to act like Greeks, who in their turn were strongly influenced by Slavs and Turks, all of whom were woven into the fabric of Balkanization.

Squeezed between the powerful empires of Germans, Russians, and Ottomans, the Balkanians made unreliable allies. Their determination to do whatever was needed to survive led to their own code of ethics: the willingness to be a traitor simply meant that one was smart. A brutal pattern of conduct—kill or be killed—was inevitably established and came to be shared by all the Eastern nations as they dealt with crises or rendered their own versions of justice. Deception, fear, and terror were regarded as effective and foolproof methods for despotic rulers to gain and maintain power over the populace. These adverse conditions were further aggravated by an element of a religious pessimism and by the fact that people looked for omens that would ensure God's assistance in solving problems. The church condoned blind obedience to heavenly and earthly authority and tended to look the other way when it came to bad forms of conduct, like bribery, political back-stabbing, blaming others, and persistent denials of wrongdoings.

Nationalism was supreme in the Balkans. Racial hatred continually fueled bitter cultural, religious, and territorial disputes as pride was equated with revenge. Inevitably the region's seismically sensitive nations periodically erupted in ethnocide with devastating, irreversible effects. All these destructive tendencies were fully exploited by the kings, czars, sultans, and emperors

in their efforts to subjugate the people of Eastern Europe. In the current geopolitical situation there is a stew of ethnicities that has long simmered in the cultural sauce of Balkanization.

The term Balkanization also refers to the endless territorial disputes that have taken place and continue to occur among the Balkan nations. They were the consequences of migratory peoples taking over regions already claimed by others, of military campaigns, ethnic uprisings, international agreements, or arbitrary division of land among neighbors. The end result was peace negotiations based on disputable settlements, imperial decisions, agreements between rulers, land transfers among royal heirs, or endowments to royal marriages, all of which led to forced migration and dislocation of people. If these dealings solved immediate problems, they also created complex demographic dynamics as people found themselves living within the boundaries of countries or nations with different languages, cultures, and religions. This geopolitical drama only worsened over the centuries, and actions intended to correct the injustices associated with borders matters only deepened ethnic disputes. In the past, numerous Balkan wars that involved different nationalities sought the intervention of Western superpowers to settle these disputes, but the solutions proved to be temporary; the conflicts only re-emerged with greater intensity.

In an effort to shed some new light on the past and present history of this area of the world, I have devoted the chapters of this work to various aspects of Eastern European history: cultural and religious conflicts, crusades, and wars often conducted out of spite and concluded with wrongful victories being claimed by dubious heroes. I investigate the specific habits, ethics, traditions, and national identities that shaped important rivalries and alliances. My main interest here is to track the origin of the various tribal peoples and their respective processes of evolution into societies, nations, countries, and empires. This volume describes the economic and social life of the various infantile societies that were subject to intrigues at royal courts—intrigues often resolved by marriage, divorce, arrest, confinement to convents or dungeons, blinding, and assassination. All of this unfolded alongside the development of the great Byzantine arts and the new languages of these societies with their unique alphabets, in an era of chivalry and governance from the manors and fortresses.

I describe how the Ottomans inched their way into the Balkans and ended up owning the region, and also show how their use of firearms on battlefields changed history forever. My intention is to bring to light certain points that have been neglected in previous histories and to identify missing historical links while, at the same time, challenging some popularly held reconstructions of history. Hopefully, this volume will also provide a number of expla-

nations for why things happen as they do today in this part of the world. I try to do this by drawing on the history of how these nations reacted in the past to good and bad times, during freedom and occupation, in victory and defeat, and how they dealt with treaties and alliances.

The work begins with a chapter about a character with whom everyone is familiar, Prince Dracula the Impaler. In the middle of the fifteenth century, he ruled the Romanian principality of Wallachia, to the immediate north of the Balkan Peninsula. There he became famous for his cruel punishment of enemies. He was important in the political scheme of that time because he tried to limit Turkish expansion above the Danube River. Against all odds, he scored victories that he believed would trigger an international Crusade and force the Ottoman Empire out of the Balkans. His life and deeds clearly reflect the intricate phenomena of Balkanization that will be explored in subsequent chapters. These show how the Byzantine Empire was toppled from its glorious zenith to an appalling low by the barbarians it once sheltered.

Chapter One

The Last Crusader: Prince Dracula

On October 31, 1448, a teenage contender to the throne of Wallachia declared himself the ruler of that land. He was not born there; he was not baptized in its Orthodox faith; his princely origin was disputable; he had no money; he had no army or supporters; and most strangely of all, he was dressed as an officer of the Turkish army he had just left. The seventeen year-old was the son of Vlad Dracul, the two time *domnitor* (ruler) of Wallachia and the illegitimate son of Prince Mircea the Elder, an iconic figure for the Romanians. Dracul's son was named Vlad the Third, later called Dracula (Son of the Devil). His tumultuous life and three periods of rule show what it was like to rule a small country in medieval Eastern Europe. They also illustrate the nascent meaning of Balkanization.

The Wallachian state once belonged to the powerful kingdom of ancient Dacia that also included the lands of Pannonia, Transylvania, Moesia, Moldavia, and western Ukraine. Roman occupation of the first four of these regions resulted in the Daco-Roman people who spoke a Latin dialect used by the Wallachians and their cousins, the Vlachs, who lived all over Eastern Europe. In the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Romanian principalities of Wallachia (also known as Muntenia/the mountainous land) and Moldavia were still independent, unlike Pannonia and Transylvania which were governed by Hungarians; Moesia was occupied by the Bulgarians and Turks; and Ukraine was ruled by Lithuania.

The central geographic position of Wallachia in Eastern Europe and its dominance of the last increment of the Danube River attracted the ever opportunistic Turks. Mircea the Elder (r. 1386–1418) pushed back these latest invaders of the Balkan Peninsula who conquered Bulgaria in 1396. Finally, in the twilight years of his life, he agreed to buy his country's autonomy and peace by paying a yearly tribute of three thousand gold coins to the Ottoman

Court. This set a pattern for his followers, including his son Vlad II Dracul and his grandson Vlad III Dracula.

The story of Dracula begins with the first ruler of Wallachia, Basarab the Founder (r. 1310–1352), whose royal house split into rival families of Danesti and Basarab, the latter producing Mircea the Elder whose illegitimate son Vlad II started the Draculesti clan. The name originated in Nuremberg at the court of the future Emperor Sigismund of the Holy Roman Empire when in 1431 Prince Vlad, who had been baptized in the Orthodox faith (like his first son, Mircea), converted to Catholicism to please his German supporters. Winning a knightly tournament proved his military skills, he was invited to join the secret order of the Dragon, a group of anti-Ottoman crusaders. Since the Wallachian throne was hereditary and held now by his kin Dan II from the rival Danesti clan, the knighted prince returned from Nuremberg to the safety of Transylvania. The dragon insignia on Vlad's tunic caused him to be nicknamed Dracul (the Devil) by the superstitious Romanians, who thought of the dragon as a demon. That same year, 1431, his second son, named Vlad, was born in the city of Sighisoara; five years later another son arrived, Radu (the Handsome). He would become Dracula's enemy and a bitter rival for the throne. Thus the Draculesti family, another splinter of the House of Basarab, entered history.

After his Turkophile half-brother Alexandru Aldea (son of Mircea the Elder) died in 1436, Vlad Dracul became the next Wallachian domnitor with the help of the Germans of Transylvania, who trusted him to keep the Turks away. But Emperor Sigismund died, and without this powerful protector, Wallachia was invaded by a Turkish army. It forced the prince to sign a treaty of submission in exchange for his country's independence. One year later, in 1442, based on the agreement he had signed in order to stay in power, Prince Dracul had no choice but to assist a Turkish expedition in Transylvania. This angered John Hunyadi (Iancu de Hunedoara), the Wallachian born general who was serving the crown of Hungary as the official governor of Transylvania, because Dracul had willingly become his vassal. Caught between superior military powers, the troubled prince decided to remain neutral. Hunyadi was called a hero for his exploits against the Turks while Vlad II was called to the Sublime Court for an explanation. The frightened prince went to Gallipoli, bringing along his sons Vlad and Radu to prove his good faith to Sultan Murad II. His oldest son Mircea was left to rule Wallachia in his absence. Upon their arrival, the prince was arrested and his two sons were sent to a fortress in Asia Minor to become loyal subjects to the Ottoman Empire. Having been thusly given a lesson in obedience, the Wallachian prince was allowed to return to his realm, only to find Mircea II destitute and Basarab II from the Danesti family ruling the country. Prince Dracul was forced to flee.

In 1443, with support from Hunyadi, Vlad Dracul was able to regain the Wallachian throne, only to be assassinated in 1447 by his own Orthodox boyars (landowners) who did not want to serve under a Catholic ruler. Officially he was blamed for the Christian defeat at Varna at the hands of the Turks in 1444 and for briefly holding Hunyadi in custody while retreating through Wallachia. Mircea II, who had participated at Varna, was ambushed; he was blinded with hot irons and then buried alive. Seeking an ally he could trust, Hunyadi installed Vladislav II from the Danesti family on the throne of Wallachia.

Meanwhile, the two young princely hostages were educated in the same Muslim spirit as their playmate, the sultan's son Mehmed II, who would grow up to become the mighty Conqueror. Radu's attractive features made him the lover of Mehmed and his father, while the roughness and obstinacy of Vlad made him subject to brutal punishments that were never forgotten by the future Impaler. While he fearlessly resisted becoming a Muslim, he was praised for his soldierly qualities and distinguished himself in the elite Janissary Corps, the Praetorian Guard of the sultan.

In September 1448 the armies of Hunyadi and Vladislav II attacked the Turks south of the Danube and successfully besieged the Vidin fortress. But the campaign took an unexpected turn when the Turks almost captured Hunyadi on the way back to Hungary. One month later Hunyadi suffered a crushing defeat at Kosovo, and Prince Vladislav II went missing in action on the battlefield. Taking full advantage of this situation, young Dracula entered Wallachia at the end of October with a mixed contingent of mercenary soldiers and seized the capital of Targoviste. But after a brief two months of rule, he had to run back to the sultan for protection while Petru II of Moldavia helped Vladislav II of the Danesti clan regain the throne. A year later Petru II was replaced by Prince Bogdan, an old friend of Draculesti family. Dracula deserted the Turkish camp and showed up in Moldavia, his mother's native land. There he cemented a friendship with his younger cousin Stephen. Each swore loyalty to the other until death. After Bogdan was murdered in 1451, the young cousins ran for their lives to Transylvania. There, Dracula was well received by Hunyadi and Hungarian King Ladislas V, both distressed at the fall of Constantinople in 1453. With the capital of Orthodoxy destroyed, the Balkan nations had no central Christian leadership that could oppose the Muslim invasion of the Balkans.

Squeezed between the meteoric rise of the Ottoman and Russian empires and facing the ever rapacious Hungarians, the Daco-Roman population struggled to remain free. (They were now named according to their locations—Bessarabians, Dobrudgians, Oltenians, Moldavians, Muntenians, Transylvanians; in a brief, Wallachians or Vlachs, a name that encompassed all of these Latin speaking people.) A similar fate awaited the Albanians, Bosnians, Croatians, Serbians,

and others who tried to maintain their independence after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. In the meantime, the Turks pushed their occupation beyond the Danube into the Crimean Peninsula, and the Black Sea became an Ottoman lake.

Under these imperialistic circumstances, in July 1456 the crescent of Islam clashed with the cross of Orthodoxy during a crusade. The Turks were defeated at Belgrade and forced to make a humiliating retreat south of the Danube. The Hungarian army suffered great losses in men and materials, and soon faced the most devastating blow of all—Hunyadi's death from the plague. Exploiting the military vacuum left by the decimated armies and already encouraged by Hunyadi, a family friend and tutor, Dracula, who was in charge of securing the Transylvanian border, crossed it into Wallachia ahead of a small mercenary force. He was opposed by an equally small army led by Vladislav II. The melee ended with a knightly duel between the man who tried to keep the throne and the one who aimed to occupy it. Dracula won. After killing his enemy he marched unopposed to Targoviste, the capital of Wallachia, where at the end of August 1456 he crowned himself as the voievode and sole domnitor of the country. His bold move was approved by Mihaly Szilagy, the brother-in-law of Hunyadi and an old friend of Draculesti family, now a powerful Transylvanian leader. Sultan Mehmed II was also pleased to see his childhood friend in power, but he still imposed the customary yearly tribute in exchange for Wallachian independence. A spectacular comet happened to light up the night sky (it would later be designated as a Halley-type comet); this was considered as divine confirmation of Dracula's right to the throne and a promise of good fortune for his reign. What followed catapulted Prince Dracula into history and Gothic literature.

Losing no time, Dracula engaged in a domestic crusade that involved bold actions and reform measures. A man of impeccable discipline and honor, overlaid with a thirst for revenge, he consolidated his power by hiring his own uniformed mercenary army. It immediately began to collect taxes from the astonished boyars. The previous rulers had depended on the benevolence of their boyars for money and a supply of fighting men, but that had changed under the new master. His second step was to eliminate the chronic situation of thieves, beggars, homeless, and plague-infested people who "polluted" Wallachia. He impaled thieves in the marketplaces and along the roads to set an example, and invited the others to a free feast, after which he burned them alive in the barns where the banquet took place. In his opinion, they had departed earthly suffering for a better afterlife. Within a year, the Wallachian roads were so safe that a lost pouch full of gold coins could remain untouched in the middle of a busy intersection.

Dracula's next major goal was to take care of the intrigue-infested Wallachian Court with its backstabbing boyars. The entirety of Wallachia was divided by the feuds of the landowners who had powers that overrode the rights of the Wallachian prince. Each landowner could pledge loyalty to different contenders to the throne, and even to foreign rulers. Dracula decided to punish the treacherous boyars who were responsible for killing his father and brother—those same aristocrats who had never wanted him in the first place and who now were plotting to eliminate him. He pondered the best way to punish them.

In 1457 he offered a princely feast to celebrate Easter and invited the arrogant boyars to be his guests. They arrived with much pomp and circumstance, carried on litters by servants, only to be arrested during the banquet. After a long march from Targoviste, they found themselves in a remote mountain region; there the formerly rich and powerful were forced to build a new castle for their merciless prince. The younger ones were worked to death; the older ones, impaled; their properties were handed over to a new nobility, certain to be loyal to Dracula as its members came from the military ranks. Dracula's instant justice pleased the commoners who nicknamed him "the Impaler."¹

Trusting in his future, Dracula began to centralize his realm by building royal palaces, fortresses, and churches; he extended the capital of Targoviste and other cities, and constructed roads to enhance domestic and international trade. He offered money to handymen to open their businesses and encouraged the middle class with tax enhancements. Meanwhile, he continued to confiscate the estates of the boyars, whom he impaled, and he founded royal villages; in exchange, he asked for peasant recruits to be trained during post-harvest months for military service.

After only one year in power, Dracula ruled his country with confidence and an iron fist, as indicated by his signing of a letter in Latin addressed to the leaders of Saxon merchants in June 1458 with, *Wlad, dei gracia par-cium Transalpinarum wayvoda* (I, Vlad, by the grace of God am voievode of Transalps²—Transalps meaning the Romanian Carpathians). That letter with its firm signature was not welcomed by the Saxons and Hungarians who certainly did not want a Wallachian dominating them. Dracula's coat of arms and the Wallachian flag showed an eagle holding a cross in its peak; under that flag he raided the Transylvanian communities around the cities of Sibiu/Hermannstadt and Brasov/Kronstadt, which sheltered many of his rivals to the crown. He impaled hundreds of suspected traitors in full view of the residents of those cities and even attempted to burn the monumental Black Church of Brasov. Furthermore, to make it clear who was in charge of Ungaro-Wallachia, he installed custom posts at the borders and forced foreign merchants to pay taxes when they traveled to, or did business in, Wallachia.

His 1458–1459 raids of carnage and mutilation convinced the affected Saxons of one thing: Dracula had to be eliminated as soon as possible.

But he seemed unstoppable. He regained possession of Bran/Dietrichstein Castle, built by the Teutonic Order and once owned by his grandfather. There he produced a son, enabling him to establish a family tradition and incorporate the castle domain into the Draculesti heritage. He also created a new princely Order by naming the best soldiers *Viteaz* (Brave); they became Wallachian knights, another new nobility who supported him. Sultan Mehmed was happy to see that his protégé was at war with everyone; this surely meant that sooner or later the fearsome prince would reach a point where the support of the Ottoman Empire was needed. In brief, Dracula was the master of his land as long as he paid the yearly tribute in gold to the sultan, and sent the required five hundred boys to be trained as Janissaries for the Ottoman army, as the tradition of vassalage required. These things he did, but when Turkish envoys arrived for an audience with Dracula, he nailed their turbans to their heads when they refused to uncover them in his presence. This ruler demanded recognition and respect from everybody and had no compunction about making that clear. Since he was occupied with his wars in Asia Minor and with moving his capital from Adrianople to Constantinople, Mehmed chose to turn a blind eye to this incident. In fact, any ambassadors who came dressed inappropriately or behaved in an irritating way were promptly impaled by Dracula. The prince firmly stated to those who were not properly trained to face a “wise ruler, then your master sentenced you to death, and if you dare to be insulting, then you are responsible for your death!”³ The higher the rank, the higher was the stake upon which the offender was impaled.

Confident in his power, Dracula agreed to provide military aid for Prince Stefan, who was attempting to occupy the throne of Moldavia. He dutifully kept the loyalty oath he had given his cousin, even as he tried to build a new coalition against Turkish expansionism. Meanwhile, he decided to leave his mark on history by building a new capital for Wallachia in the Danubian flat land at București (Bucharest), a trade center founded by his grandfather Mircea the Elder. Located in the marshes of the Dambovitza River, Dracula’s capital was surrounded by a natural moat infested with leeches, snakes, and mosquitoes—a certain deterrent for the horse mounted Turks, heavily dressed people of the sandy desert who avoided fighting in wet lands. Furthermore, by moving the capital near the Danube and counting on a crusade that would free the Balkans, the prince hoped to fulfill his secret ambition—to reunite all Vlachs in one kingdom and rebuild the Dacian Empire that was once the second largest in ancient Europe. Then the empire’s capital, București, would be right in the middle of the Dacian land recovered from Turks and Bulgars.

Dracula's confidence was boosted by the ascent of King Matthias to the throne of Hungary and by the election of Pope Pius II; the latter called for a new crusade and asked Matthias to establish a military base in Hungary to serve as a collection point for the crusaders. But few knew that, unlike Dracula, the fifteen year-old monarch had no intention of joining any anti-Ottoman war. Believing everything was going his way, Dracula confidently signed his documents and letters from București with, *Din mila lui Dumnezeu, Io Vlad voievod si domn si fiul marelui Vlad voievod, stapanind si domnind peste toata tara Ungrovlahiei, Amlasului si Fagarasului herteg* (By the grace of God, I, Vlad, voievode and lord and the son of the great Vlad voievode, Vlad II Dracul, ruling over the entire country of Ungaro-Wallachia, Amlas, and Fagaras duchies).⁴ This was certified by an endowment document he signed on September 20, 1459. Thus he made clear that at least part of Transylvania was his. This self-entitlement was frowned upon by the Saxons and Hungarians living there, who certainly did not want Dracula to be their ruler. He had already done financial damage to their trade, not to mention the raids and horrifying killings in the domains that had once belonged to his father. Now those dukedoms were under the Saxons, who continued to shelter Dracula's half-brother Vlad the Monk, Dan III, Laiota, and other knights from rival families who aspired to the throne.

It was at this point that a Turkish army corps entered southern Wallachia and carried out a campaign of pillage and rape. Dracula's cavalry intercepted the retreating Turks whose pace had been slowed by the plunder and prisoners they were taking with them. The Wallachians slaughtered the invaders; any survivors were pulled by horses into sharp stakes laid flat on the ground. The enslaved people were set free and rewarded with plunder taken from the Turks. A few enemies were allowed to cross south of the Danube so they could tell their leaders about the horrors they had witnessed. Prince Dracula considered the raid a breach of the treaty he had with the sultan—sufficient reason to stop paying the tribute to the Porte.

One year later, irritated by the refusal of the Saxon merchants to pay taxes while trading in Wallachia, Dracula again stormed their Transylvanian communities. He plundered and destroyed them, focusing particularly on those who had sheltered his rivals for the throne. The Saxons of Brasov, Sibiu, and Barsa Land bitterly complained to King Matthias about the cruelty of the Wallachians, who certainly were not friends of the Hungarians and had gone too far with their Draculian punishments. Seeking their own justice, the unhappy merchants decided to eliminate the troublemaking prince and replace him with Dan III (the brother of Vladislav II), who pretended that King Matthias urged him to take the throne of Wallachia. Before Easter in 1460, the eager contender crossed the Transylvanian border into Wallachia, leading a

group of boyar dissidents and a military contingent paid by the Brasovians. It was a doomed venture; Dracula was informed in advance and intercepted the party with a well-planned ambush in the Carpathian Mountains. Once again the prince rose to the occasion and humiliated Dan III in a spectacular duel, while the trespassers were slaughtered by Wallachian soldiers. Dan, who was accused of killing Dracula's father and brother, was forced to dig his own grave and recite his own burial ceremony; then he was beheaded. His surviving followers were impaled at different heights according to their titles. Only seven enemies returned to Transylvania to tell the gruesome story of their defeat. This was intended to serve as a warning for anyone else who might have similar ideas.

Prolonging the victory, Dracula and his cavalry laid to waste so much of the area around the city of Brasov that its Saxon residents agreed to never again plot against him. However, the duchies of Amlas and Fagaras, historically part of Wallachia and through inheritance the property of the Draculesti family, refused to surrender Dracula's rivals to him. The vengeful ruler responded with a raid that confirmed his reputation as a blood-thirsty tyrant: according to German narrations, some thirty thousand people were massacred on Saint Bartholomew's Day. Thousands were impaled on the hill facing Brasov, again as a lesson to its defiant citizens. This punitive expedition, which became a part of European folklore, greatly displeased King Matthias, who saw his Transylvanian province threatened by the unruly Wallachian voievode. Finally an agreement was reached with the Impaler: the merchants promised to return all anti-Dracula dissidents; pay 15,500 forints at once (only four thousand were ever paid); and supply four thousand soldiers (who were never sent) in case Prince Vlad needed to carry out a war against the Turks. In exchange, the Wallachian ruler promised to stop the Turks from entering Transylvania. It was a deal that made Dracula confident that he would not be attacked from the northwest; also, it assured him that he did not need to fear another foreign plot against him. However, there was a significant problem remaining, one that he could do nothing about: the Ottoman Empire numbered over fifteen million people and had an army whose size equaled that of his Wallachian population of five hundred thousand.

That same year, Mihail Szilagy, Dracula's only ally and protector, was seized by the Turks. Since he was considered a spy, he was tortured and sawed in half in Constantinople. Dracula knew that his refusal to pay the yearly tribute and to pledge vassalage to Mehmed the Conqueror put him next in line to be hacked to pieces. Fortunately, he had just learned that Pope Pius had pledged one hundred thousand ducats to finance another crusade and already delivered forty thousand gold coins to King Matthias who had offered Hungary as the host for the western armies. He had also promised that forty

thousand Hungarian soldiers would be available at the time when the international crusade began. In spite of his bloody raids in Transylvania, Dracula believed King Matthias to be his trusted ally and sent an ambassador of good will to Buda. He carried a letter in which Dracula professed his undivided commitment to fight the Turks. It was a weighty decision, considering what the Prince did not know about the Council of Mantua of 1459: the Venetians were reluctant to have their military and transport navy participate in a new crusade, the French were expecting a war with England, and the Poles were fighting German knights who also fought against each other. Worse yet, he did not know that his letter of loyalty to Matthias and his unabated commitment to the future crusade was intercepted by the Turks and handed over to Sultan Mehmed. Instead of solving his country's problems, Dracula had become a problem for everyone.

Nevertheless, the pope was fully committed to a united military effort that would throw the Turks out the Christian continent; he scheduled the crusade to begin in spring 1462. The best Dracula could do was strengthen his alliance with King Matthias with whom he signed a peace agreement. This news, along with Dracula's repeated refusal to pay the yearly tribute, infuriated Sultan Mehmed who ordered Catavolinos, his trusted Greek diplomat, to go to Wallachia and bring the ungrateful Prince to Constantinople. Dracula received Catavolinos with all the necessary honors, but was aware of one thing: if he went to Constantinople he would face certain, horrible death. Using the pretext that if he left the country, the Saxons and the treacherous boyars would install one of his rivals on the throne, the prince offered instead to pay ten thousand ducats and deliver five hundred boys. Shortly thereafter, Hamza Pasha, the commander of the Nicopolis fortress entered Wallachia with a Turkish contingent to take over the transport. To Dracula, the contingent looked more like an invading army of ten thousand. Suspecting that Hamza's real mission was to capture him, the prince charged the invaders with his cavalry and decimated the intruders. Then, to prove his anti-Turkish stand to the West, Dracula ordered all the Turkish prisoners, including Catavolinos, to be impaled around the capital of Targoviste. He decapitated Hamza and had his body impaled on the highest stake, which was painted in gold; the head was put in a honey jar and sent to King Matthias as proof of the Wallachian commitment to fight the Ottomans. This placed the teenaged monarch in an awkward position. He did not want to attract the fury of the sultan whose armies had just occupied Serbia and were about to attack Belgrade, which was held by the Hungarians at the time. Dracula received no reply from the Hungarian capital.

He spent the rest of 1461 training his army for war, envisioning himself as the next Hunyadi. At the same time, he fortified the new capital of București

and transformed it into a prosperous trade city. Constructed on wooden platforms above the marshland, it was surrounded by heavy palisades and brick bastions and defended by cannons he had taken during Transylvanian expeditions and from Turkish forts he had sacked. He built a fortified church on the nearby island on Snagov Lake as his refuge and a place to keep the royal treasury. By now, Voievode Vlad III was the supreme ruler of Wallachia.

Encouraged by his success and wanting to take advantage of the fact that Mehmed and his armies were fighting in Asia Minor in order to conquer Trebizond, Dracula prepared to raid the Turkish garrisons south of the frozen Danube. Knowing full well that the Turks sought to avoid fighting in winter and being determined to jumpstart a crusade of his own that would give him undisputed ownership of Dacian Moesia, Dracula led his cavalry to the fortress of Giurgiu. This prosperous port city had belonged to Wallachia since time immemorial; it had been rebuilt by his father Vlad Dracul, but the Turks had occupied it and transformed it into one of their strongest northern military bases. Dressed as a highly ranked Turkish officer and leading a Wallachian squadron wearing similar uniforms, Dracula approached the fortress on a snowy day and ordered the garrison commander to open the gates. The sentries believed the officer who spoke perfect Turkish to be an important messenger traveling with bodyguards, and let them in. The intruders silenced the sentries at once and opened the gates wide for the rest of the Wallachian cavalry to rush in and take over the fortress. They killed the Turks and, after looting their quarters, set them afire. What followed would fuel the legend of Dracula: over the next two weeks his soldiers engaged in raids that covered 800 kilometers/500 miles along the frozen Danube to the Black Sea.

Dracula's priority was to destroy the main bridgeheads the Turks used to cross the Danube into Wallachia. He went on a rampage and sacked many Turkish garrisons and non-Christian settlements on the Bulgarian river bank. His Wallachians hacked the Muslim inhabitants to bits, impaled their leaders, built pyramids of enemy heads in the middle of the plazas, and looted and then burned their dwellings. Yet, for the Vlachs who had been living in Bulgaria since Dacian times, these were blessed days: they regained their freedom from the Turkish yoke of oppression. Countless numbers of them joined the fight, either because they sought revenge or because they believed in Dracula's mission. A few Italian, Hungarian, and Moldavian travelers were detained by the Prince as witnesses; they were sent back to their leaders to report on the carnage resulting from Dracula's mini-crusade. In his correspondence with King Matthias on February 11, 1462, Dracula asked for help to continue the fight; the Prince listed the names of important locations he had destroyed, among them Durostor, Giurgiu, Nicopolis, Orsova, Rahova Rusciuk, Turnu, and free northern Dobrudja. He chillingly estimated the number

of killed Turks and their Bulgarian collaborators at 23,884 “without counting those we burned in homes or whose heads were not cut by our soldiers.” And aware that he reached the point of no return in his relations with Mehmed, he concluded, “Thus Your Highness must know that I have broken the peace with him ...not for *our sake*, but for the sake of the honor of Your Highness...The Holy Cross, and for guarding all Christianity and strengthening the Catholic law.”⁵ To substantiate his war report, he had the letter delivered with two large bags filled with the noses and ears of the dead Turks. Finally, he claimed to have avenged the memory of Szilagy, his protector who had been slain by the Turks, and of his grandfather Mircea the Elder, who was blamed for the defeat of the crusaders at Nicopolis in 1396.

Dracula fully enjoyed his victorious campaign; no doubt, he considered himself a true crusader. After all, Pope Pius II had expressed admiration for his extraordinary military exploits, even though they had resulted in the deaths of only some ten thousand Ottoman soldiers in isolated garrisons. The Bulgars, Greeks, Serbs, and other Turkish-occupied nations were likewise impressed by Dracula’s successes, which encouraged them to rise up and fight to regain their independence. A flood of Gypsies had already left Bulgaria and moved to welcoming Wallachia. For the moment, Dracula was the undisputed hero of the entire region; that news reached Mehmed in Asia Minor as he was victoriously concluding another military expedition there.

The sultan was not about to let this situation continue. Freeing troops no longer needed in Anatolia, he entrusted Grand Vizier Mahmud with an army of thirty thousand to restore order in the troubled lands and bring Dracula to Constantinople. The general regained control of the most devastated cities in Bulgaria and left twelve thousand men to garrison them; then he used eighteen thousand crack troops to invade southeastern Wallachia. In March they crossed the Danube and sacked the port of Braila from whence the Turks began punishing raids of rape and plunder, taking captive many Vlachs. Dracula’s cavalry counter-attacked so strongly that it forced the Turks to rush back into Bulgaria for shelter. Many were killed, a few thousand were captured on the left bank of the Danube, and only eight thousand escaped across the wide river. The sultan was so upset that he slapped the humiliated Mahmud. The incident did more harm than good for the Turkish population who were in a panic because of Dracula’s repeated victories and had begun retreating across the Straights of the Bosphorus to the safety of Asia Minor.

This strengthened Mehmed’s resolve that Kaziglu Bey (The Impaler Prince) must be stopped, and the sooner the better, since the Greek monks of Rhodes were tolling the church bells in Dracula’s honor and the pope (properly informed by Pietro Tommasi, the Venetian ambassador at Buda) prayed for his final victory. At this crucial juncture, Mehmed, who had added to

his sultan title the epithets “the Reformer,” “The Great,” “The Victorious,” and “the Conqueror,” was under added pressure to calm the rumor that the Kaziglu Bey was on his way to storm Constantinople. The sultan, who had conquered two empires, twelve kingdoms, and four hundred cities, was being humiliated by a former child hostage, who used to sleep on the roofs of the military barracks out of fear of being sodomized by the Janissary officers. The undefeated Mehmed decided to take matters into his own hands, and began preparing to invade Wallachia. After consulting his astrologers, the thirty year-old sultan resolved to personally lead the punitive expedition. His personal Janissary guard was larger than the entire army of the lunatic Dracula. Moreover, it was time for the sultan to show his recognition of his beloved Radu the Handsome, his loyal companion who was now ready to replace his bloodthirsty brother on the throne of Wallachia.

Fully aware that he could not continue to be victorious, Dracula considered the winter raids finished and went back to București with his army, prisoners, Vlachian refugees, Christians who had run away from Turks, and a long column of carts full of plunder. Most importantly, he brought with him many captured cannons of different sizes and paraded them together with the captives. Among the captives were Gypsies who had volunteered to fight for Wallachia; Dracula considered them skilled blacksmiths and jewelry makers. Only highly ranked Turkish prisoners were impaled; the rest were taken to complete the building of the new capital of Wallachia. He indulged in a well-deserved respite marked by a chain of celebrations. It was, however, interrupted by incoming news about sultan’s war preparations. Suddenly, Dracula realized that he had to single-handedly face a massive Ottoman army led by the angry sultan who was seeking revenge and wanted to humiliate him. Faced with the abysmal reality of not having any allies, Dracula’s jubilation plunged into despair: his anti-Ottoman mission was at stake as were his throne and his life.

Others were likewise aware of the sultan’s wrath and the ultimate futility of Dracula’s intent to fight the mighty Ottoman armies. One was Pietro Tommasi, who had represented Venice at Buda and joined Dracula in his plea to the West for help. He had seen letters sent by the Wallachian prince to King Matthias, in which Dracula tried to claim that, “by helping us, you really help yourself by stopping their army far from your land and by not allowing them to destroy our land and harm and oppress us.”⁶ Clearly, Dracula was holding onto the hope that the Hungarian king would come with all or part of his army, or, if he was unable to travel, would order the troops under his command to aid the crusaders. Dracula begged for any military help he could get, even from much closer Transylvania, and requested that it arrive no later than April. After that date, the ice on the Danube would melt and the Turkish fleets from Constantinople and

Gallipoli could easily bring in massive military enforcements. Fully confident in his mission, he invoked the wish of Almighty God who “will give us victory over the Infidel, the enemies of the Cross and Christ.”

In the meantime, Dracula tried to get help from the Transylvanians, Moldavians, Poles, Tartars, and others who so far had refused to join the crusade. Their reasoning was simple and sound: success would make Dracula too strong while failure would bring the punishing Turks into their lands which were currently peaceful. Diplomat Tommasi continued to read Dracula’s messages to King Matthias and in turn sent many well documented letters urging his superiors to help Dracula, whom he called *the Vallchian* “who was better than can be imagined,” in his fight against the Turk (Sultan Mehmed). Since he was fully aware of the limited military power of Wallachia and Transylvania to continue the war, the diplomat advised the doge of Venetia to contact the pope for immediate and sufficient help. That help, upon which Dracula’s fate hung, never came.

As Dracula correctly predicted, the vanguard of the Ottoman expedition reached the Danube at the end of spring. Mehmed was so certain of military success that he took along Tursun Bey, his personal secretary, to record descriptions of the victorious battles against Dracula. By June 1462 the Turkish fleet was lined up on the lower Danube River, but because of severe rain storms they could not land troops and supplies. Searching for the best place to set anchor, the warships continued to sail up and down the river, forcing the mounted Wallachians follow them to prevent a bridgehead. To the sultan’s surprise, the Wallachians sank many ships using cannons captured from the Saxons and Turks. Another fleet from the Morava River brought the Sipahi cavalry and infantrymen on the Danube to Vidin. Their 120 heavy cannons took random shots at the laughing Wallachians who made obscene gestures on the opposite bank of the Danube. But the Wallachians’ fighting formations of thirty thousand were too few and far between to cover the Turkish attack line of 150,000 troops from Vidin to the Braila fortresses. Soon the rain stopped. This enabled the invading army to attempt to cross the Danube at Nicopolis-Turnu. Following a cannon barrage over a Wallachian camp that happened to be defended by Gypsy recruits (who fled the scene at once), the first sacrificial troops rushed in rowboats to land under the cover of night. Daybreak revealed to the sultan a surprising scene of horror: squadrons of Wallachian horsemen were hacking the Ottoman marines to bits. They were exhausted from digging their defense lines all night. The last three hundred troops who landed were practically slaughtered in their boats by Dracula’s cavalry which had just returned from punishing the revolting boyars of the Oltenia region.

At this point, the entire Turkish fleet rallied and initiated what would be prolonged cannon fire on the defenseless cavalymen who had to retreat. During the first week of June, the Turkish engineers succeeded in connecting the opposite Danube banks with a pontoon bridge, and Janissaries crossed the river en masse. Mehmed and Radu crossed as well and rewarded the brave soldiers of Allah with thirty thousand gold coins. From there, the Turks marched through the immense Vlasia forest used by the Wallachians to carry out ambushes and successful hit-and-run tactics. Facing an enemy at least three times more numerous than his own men, Dracula was forced to retreat inland. There he adopted a scorched earth strategy—animals and population were evacuated, crops were set afire, and wells were poisoned. Still, the invaders cautiously made slow but steady progress toward the old capital of Targoviste. Dracula was justifiably alarmed and begged Matthias for military help: could he at least send a few hundred Transylvanians as a token to the alliance he had with the West? The king did not lift a finger to help. His ambition was to rule Austria and Czechia; Bohemia was more important than Wallachia; and King Frederick III of Hapsburg, not the distant Mehmed II, was his real adversary. His dream was to become the new Holy Roman Emperor, not to help a needy but haughty prince in a doomed crusade. As for the pope's money, Matthias needed sixty thousand ducats to buy the holy crown from Frederick; his next priority was to build his three hundred-room palace. As far as the Turkish invasion was concerned, the king would win regardless of its outcome: if Dracula was victorious, Matthias would get the credit for being his boss; if the sultan won, then Hungary would be left alone because it hadn't helped the troublemaking Wallachia. In the meantime, Matthias could enjoy watching the two enemies slaughter each other, believing that Hungary, with its population of four million, was playing the role of superpower in Eastern Europe.

Dracula continued to write imploring letters to King Matthias and even to the khan of the Tartars in the Crimea, emphasizing, "Your land will be next to suffer the same misfortune." Still, no answer was forthcoming. As for the rest of the European crusaders, they were horrified by the Black Plague that infested German lands and were unwilling to take a risk and travel into what they heard were infested Balkans. To go there and fight was suicide. Moreover, none of them wanted to die defending a sadistic ruler who might decide to impale them as well. In truth, the so-called crusaders were reduced to a status symbol: knights who battled each other to rule mini estates in small kingdoms. The daring Voievode Vlad III was left to fight the Turkish invasion alone. By this time, Pope Pius had learned about the massive Turkish invasion and delegated Pietro Tommasi to investigate what happened with the tens of thousands of gold ducats sent to Matthias to organize a crusade and

help Prince Dracula. In an attempt to save face, the annoyed king ordered a general inspection of his army prior to its being sent to Wallachia, 300 miles away, across the Carpathian Mountains and Transylvania.

Encouraged by this news, the prince renewed his hope and intensified his hit-and-run attacks against the invaders whose famous discipline began to deteriorate. Turkish squadrons sent to find food and water never returned, only to be found impaled on the road ahead. In many cases their horses were as well. Marching across the open plains of Wallachia in the torrid summer heat, the heavily armored Turks sought shade for their steel armor plates that could be used to fry eggs. The exhaustion of both men and animals led to the abandonment of cannons, which were promptly seized by the Wallachians and used against the former owners. Horses without fodder and water were also abandoned, only to find better masters who in a few days brought them back to fighting shape. The sultan, who was suffering from bleeding hemorrhoids, had to dismount his horse and be carried on a litter. Worst of all, the Turks had to keep at a distance the countless lepers and plague-infested people sent by Dracula to greet the invaders.

After two weeks of contending with these appalling marching conditions, Mehmed halted his troops before approaching Targoviste and ordered camps to be set up on the banks of the Ialomitsa River. Finally, his army could enjoy an endless supply of fresh water. To raise morale, the sultan ordered the musicians to play invigorating tunes; these and the pounding of drums produced the desired invigorating effects. Encampments with thousands of tents were mounted and surrounded by the luggage, wagons, animals, and bivouacs of the auxiliary troops. Passages into each camp were guarded by sentinels and patrolled by Sipah cavalymen, while Janissary units cordoned off the green tents of the generals and the gold-red tent of Mehmed II. Oxen that were no longer useful were slaughtered. Soon the smell of steaks on the fires smothered the stench of the latrines. After the men ate well and prayed to Allah, the fires were allowed to die out. The darkness of night blanketed the smoky camps. All seemed to be under control and much-needed sleep could not have come at a better time. But the serenity would not last; a decisive battle took place during that Friday night, June 17, 1462.

Deciding to go with a risky strategy, Dracula had dressed himself as a high-ranking Turkish officer. As such, he approached the sentries and ordered them to let his horsemen enter the sultan's main camp. The sleeping guards were silently killed. Hundreds of Wallachians on horses with hooves covered in muffling cloth dashed inside the camp. They followed their prince who was looking for the sultan's tent which he had identified earlier in the day while riding past. Long columns of Wallachian horsemen stormed the main camps to assist Dracula's first attackers. But due to anxiety and darkness, he

charged the tents of viziers Isaac and then of Mahmud, fighting against the wrong bodyguards who screamed in terror. The fearful noises caused the rest of the camp to wake up. As they began to stir, the Wallachians were cutting the ropes that anchored the canvas and leather tents, causing them to collapse on the sleepy soldiers and thus preventing them from joining the fight. When they managed to free themselves, it was still a pitch black night; they tripped over the ropes and began to kill each other, suspecting everyone was the enemy dressed in Turkish uniform. Finally, Dracula found the sultan's tent which was marked with a standard of seven horses' tails; but he killed only the servants. The Great Mehmed was inside another tent belonging to his lover. The surprise attack created the expected panic that was fully exploited by the seven thousand Wallachian raiders who slaughtered the enemy. The sleeping camps were transformed into a bloodbath. When it was time for reinforcements, Dracula blew into his ram's horn signaling Viteaz Gales, his second in command, to arrive with the rest of the army and finish off the Turks.

It just so happened that at the same moment, the thunder of drums sounded from nearby, calling the Janissaries to fight. They encircled the terrified sultan, and their double-headed pole-axes began to hack at the Wallachians whose horses were now entangled in the loose tent ropes. Soon the gruesome face-to-face and hand-to-hand combat began to tilt in favor of the more numerous defenders. Vainly Dracula blew his horn; Gales could not hear it. Believing the night attack was over, the viteaz commander ordered his men to turn around and gallop to the safety of the Targoviste walls. It was a military blunder that would change the history of Sultan Mehmed and his empire. With the element of surprise now lacking and bleeding from a head wound, Dracula on his white Arabian horse dashed over the dead bodies and collapsed tents to join other Wallachians fighting their way out of the hellish encampment. The attacking survivors vanished in the night as fast as they came, while the Turks continued to kill each other; some gave chase to the departing attackers. When morning light shone over the camp, it revealed that the carnage had, for the most part, been inflicted by frightened Turks upon each other. Ironically, the sneak attack had been inspired by a similar night attack used by Mehmed nine years before, when he conquered Constantinople.

The next day, the Wallachians rounded up the Turks who had fled from their camps and the countless animals who broke loose during the fight. Most of the wounded raiders who had covered their prince's retreat succeeded in returning to Targoviste. From far away they heard the drums and the shouts of *al-Tawakkul'ala Allah!* (Our full trust is in God-Allah!), while Mehmed reviewed his troops to boost their confidence. Dracula did the same in his camp, looking for those soldiers who were wounded in the back; these he

declared cowards and ordered them to be executed. He impaled Viteaz Gales for the same reason, a cardinal mistake he would later regret.

Some ten thousand Turks died in the night attack, another three thousand were taken prisoner, and one thousand Wallachians never returned to their camp. Despite this, the sultan ordered his secretary Tursun Bey to write about the raid on his army: "it was a drop of water that hit the ocean."⁷ And so it was recorded in history books. Above the sultan's camps, thousands of vultures, falcons, and black crows glided past, all looking for fresh prey. More determined than ever to destroy Dracula's military power, the sultan ordered his army to continue the invasion and occupy Targoviste.

Meanwhile, Radu the Handsome and his loyalists were campaigning on the Danubian plains for support to replace his brother. It was not difficult to convince them; he only had to promise the boyars that he would restore their privileges and assure the defectors from Dracula's camp that they would not be punished. But above and beyond this, he preached of a lasting peace, a gentle reign, and no revenge for any past wrongdoings. Radu sent envoys to the Saxon cities hardest hit by Dracula, tempting them with old fashioned advantageous trade regulations and vouching for the sanctity of their families. His good nature attracted instant allies, including inhabitants of București and Targoviste, who had had enough of the cruelty of his brother. Happy to hear the good news, the Turks, under Mehmed's command, pressed forward. But Dracula was far from surrendering and offered the invaders yet another horrifying spectacle. Just before reaching Targoviste they came upon a forest of impaled Turkish prisoners and Wallachians suspected of being traitors; it covered an area two miles long and one mile wide. According to Chalkondyles, a Byzantine chronicler who also described the war, some twenty thousand bodies were rotting in the sun and being eaten by birds and worms—the work of Dracula's well paid mercenaries. The Turks passed through the "forest" and entered Targoviste unopposed, only to find the streets filled with people dying of the plague and begging for food.

By the end of June, having occupied a worthless city, afraid of the deadly epidemic, and wanting to avoid subjecting his army to further horrors and loss of morale the sultan ordered his troops, now reduced by half, to retreat. In confirming this, Chalkondyles wrote that the Wallachians, whom he called "Dacians," instilled much fear in the invaders "who in a great hurry crossed Istru [Danube]" into Bulgaria.⁸ Their disorderly retreat, without plunder, even without their horses, looking sick and dressed in ragged uniforms, showcased their sad ordeal in the "country of Dacia." He also wrote, "the emperor said that he could not take the land away from a man who does such marvelous things and can exploit his rule and his subjects in this way and that surely a man who had accomplished this is worthy of greater things."⁹

However this event was described, it was an outright defeat of a massive Ottoman army and an unforgettable humiliation for Mehmed the Conqueror. Dracula, on the other hand, was optimistic and sent a happy message to King Matthias, promising to convert to Catholicism and have all of Wallachia do so as well, if the Hungarians helped him win the final crusade. Confident in his mission, the prince continued to inflict casualties on the enemy in their disorderly retreat, while all his messages to Matthias were intercepted by rival boyars. As for the Hungarian army, it was moving at snail's pace toward Transylvania, as ordered by the young king whose aim was to avoid a military confrontation with the Turks. Then unexpectedly, another army entered eastern Wallachia, but not to help.

Learning about the Turkish retreat along the Danube, Prince Stefan of Moldavia decided to occupy Chilia, the northernmost Danubian port of Wallachia. Believing his cousin Dracula was finished, Stefan rushed to take over the rich city before the Turks or Hungarians could do so. Dracula had to dispatch seven thousand Wallachian warriors (practically half of his army) to defend the vital city, using cannons to repel the attacks of their co-Romanians. The new weapon was so efficient that on June 22 it severely wounded Stefan in the leg; because of this, the siege was called off, and he retreated with his army to Moldavia. This was a devastating blow for Dracula who had helped his friend and relative gain the throne. Stefan was now behaving like an enemy. Suddenly, it was clear to Dracula that he was a lone crusader; he had not a single ally.

Defying the reality of defeat and determined to save face, on July 11 Mehmed made a triumphal entrance into the city of Adrianople. He acted like a victor, and in a way, he was. Radu was already recognized as the Wallachian ruler by most of the boyars who had rallied around him and by the commoners who were fed up with the long war. Still worse for Dracula, whose already limited military power was now divided, a Turkish corps retaliated by sacking and burning part of Braila after failing to capture Chilia. Meanwhile King Matthias was told that monks from Greece were singing *Te Deum Laudamus* in honor of Dracula and that Pope Pius was putting together a coalition he wanted to lead in person to bring this crusade to a total victory. Matthias rushed to please the pontiff, reporting that the Turkish army had been defeated. To back this up, on July 15 the reluctant king left Buda with his army. This was very good news to Dracula, and it restored his confidence.

With his increased energy and renewed determination to win, Dracula regrouped his scattered army. He chalked up two victories (July 26 and September 8) against Radu's Turkish-backed units while on a march to capture the cities of Giurgiu and București. Dracula's success was promptly reported by many, like Domenico Balbi who wrote on June 27 from Constantinople,

describing the invasion of Wallachia and the numerous Turkish defeats, including the Buzau battle. On August 3 Aloisio Gabriel from Candia (Crete) confirmed the pitiful retreat of the Turkish army from Wallachia to Adrianople, concluding a letter with: "The danger passed, praised be the Lord!"¹⁰ For the time being, the Turks were licking their wounds. On September 17 King Matthias reviewed his troops in the Transylvanian city of Turda, still more than 100 miles away from the Wallachian border. Two weeks later, Dracula scored his last major victory against enemy troops moving from Braila to conquer București. After many skirmishes, the battle took place in the middle of the Danubian plain.¹¹ There, in spite of his being outnumbered and outgunned, Dracula's heroism was decisive in the defeat of Radu's forces. But, he again did something extremely damaging to his reputation: he impaled the Wallachians loyal to Radu, and, to everyone's astonishment, he freed all the Turkish prisoners. This was his peace token to Mehmed, but it was a major tactical mistake with respect to his own people.

Ironically, the peaceful Radu was more popular than his brother who had won one battle after another in knightly fashion but persisted in impaling people. Wallachia was now divided into two parts: Dracula ruled in the northeast and his brother in the southwest. The latter territory became larger with each passing day. By now the old boyars had taken over most of the lands where Dracula's soldiers were not present. Worried about the fact that their families would be facing famine and the harshness of the approaching winter, the soldiers began returning in droves to their homes to harvest their crops. It became clear that Dracula's concept of a conscript army did not work.

As for the Hungarians, Moldavians, Transylvanians, and Saxons, Dracula's heroics did only one thing—and it was most unwelcome: it put the Ottoman armies next to their borders. The old boyars saw in Dracula's crusade nothing but a thirst for absolute power, and they realized that it had brought destruction to Wallachia. Neither King Matthias, nor other Christian leaders wanted to see a victorious Dracula in control of half of the Danube commerce. He had already made clear his desire to unite all Wallachians into an idealized Dacian kingdom of Greater Romania. But this meant only one thing: when he was strong enough, Dracula would occupy the Balkans and torturously rule the Balkanians. So, none of his neighbors jumped to help the lone crusader, and he lost his new capital of București to Radu's forces. Nevertheless, the nearby garrison on Snagov Lake, where part of the Wallachian treasury was stored, still repelled Turkish attacks using the large cannons Dracula had mounted on the shores of the island. When the island was finally conquered, the occupiers were blasted into smithereens by explosions of the gun powder depots. No treasure was ever found.

Dracula's greatest fear materialized when he received the news that the former capital of Targoviste had also surrendered to Radu without a fight; at the same time, he learned that even his viteaz commanders did not want to spend a second Christmas away from their families. His own family was also far away in the Poienari Castle built with the slave labor of punished boyars. Dracula decided to head to Campulung, the city near the castle, where he intended to establish his new capital and where he had already stored the royal treasure (in the cellars of the old Abbey). Leaving a strong garrison there, the prince finally arrived at Poienari, high on the mountain cliffs, and warmly embraced his wife and six year-old son.

Days later he saw through his long spyglass that Turkish mountaineers had set up camp below and were preparing to attack the castle, which was surrounded by the deep gorges of the Arges River. Their many attempts were easily repelled by the one hundred-men garrison, who rolled rocks down onto the intruders. Turkish cannons placed on the hills across from the castle opened fire, and to their surprise, the castle cannons returned fire, aiming down with deadly precision. But Dracula realized it was a fight the Turks could not lose. He sent his son to nearby Transylvania; his wife chose to jump off the cliff to her death. Most of his servants and soldiers vanished as well. The prince managed to escape the besieged castle with a saddlebag filled with crown jewelry. Followed by a dozen bodyguards, he arrived at Campulung. His only hope was King Matthias.

On November 3 the king arrived in the city of Brasov—not to help Dracula, but to celebrate the patrons of the Saxon city. This was the best way for him to accept donations from the Transylvanians as he intended to apply the money toward the purchase of the Hungarian crown from Emperor Frederick. But he also he heard firsthand of the cruelties inflicted by Dracula on the city, including his setting fire to the Catholic cathedral. When Dracula heard that Matthias had arrived, he rushed to see the king. Leading a small army of five hundred mercenaries who guarded three wagons loaded with royal treasure, he stopped at the small fortress of Orația which he had built to control the Rucar-Brasov corridor. There he stored the treasure before eagerly leading a squadron of viteaz officers through the mountain passage to Brasov. It is said that upon looking back to Wallachia, he pitied himself for being the ruler of such a small country.

The meeting with the king began surprisingly well. The prince was fluent in Hungarian, and both he and Matthias reminisced about their heroic Wallachian fathers and their anti-Ottoman stands. But when Matthias confessed he had just signed a peace agreement with Sultan Mehmed, Dracula's blood began to boil; he shouted insults, declaring that the king's actions showed disrespect for the crusade which was now proven worthless. The king bluntly

responded that Dracula's one-man war had not been wanted by anyone in the first place, and then he dismissed the outraged ex-voievode of Wallachia. After their meeting, a secret document signed by Dracula was handed to Matthias. It was a letter that had been intercepted, addressed to the sultan whom the prince called "Emperor of Emperors;" it pledged loyalty to the Ottoman Court, offered to hand over Transylvania, and promised to seize Matthias if Mehmed allowed Dracula to continue his reign in Wallachia. The letter was written in poor Latin, which did not make sense because Dracula had mastered Latin; furthermore, if he was writing to the sultan, he would have used Turkish, which they both spoke. Equally unlikely was the submissive tone—not at all Dracula's style. Obviously, it was a clumsy forgery, most likely done by a rival clan of Draculesti family, but this did not matter to Matthias who summoned Dracula for another audience. This time he offered the fugitive crusader a bargain that was difficult to resist: in exchange for the royal treasury, Dracula could continue to rule Wallachia. The prince agreed. Followed by a Czech mercenary contingent led by General Jan Jiskra von Brandeis, he returned to the Oraşia fortress to retrieve the promised gold.

What happened next is an example of how a double-crosser is double-crossed in an unmistakably Balkan way of doing business. Jiskra and his men were told to sleep in the nearby village while Dracula and his entourage went to the fortress. The next day three heavy wagons were lowered from the fortress to the road below, and Jiskra's mercenaries, who outnumbered the Wallachians five to one, took their pre-planned positions to assassinate Dracula. But first the general inspected the contents of the wagons. They were loaded with smoked meats and sacks of grains. The stunned Jiskra drew his sword as did his soldiers, but all froze as Dracula smugly faced them and pointed out that if he were killed, Matthias would never see the treasure. With no other option, the mercenaries took the prince prisoner and brought him back to the king.

Surprisingly, Matthias treated Dracula well, and then asked him again to deliver the treasury. When Dracula refused, he was confronted with the forged letter. On the basis of this "evidence," Matthias had the prince taken to Hungary.

Dracula was treated royally. Matthias showed him off to all the foreign dignitaries as a premier fighter for Christianity and living proof that the pope's money had been put to good use in the last crusade. In reality, by Christmas Dracula was, at age 31, no longer a feared and revered ruler, but a prisoner in the fortress of Buda. (The entire ordeal kept Matthias so busy that he missed the opportunity to campaign against Emperor Frederick, who had been attacked by the Viennese but escaped to rule again. If Matthias had marched on Vienna only a month before, he could have had the crown of

Saint Stephen of Hungary at no cost.¹²) Captivity did not change Dracula's attitude. His appearance produced a frightened murmur among guests; what they saw was a rather short man with broad shoulders, a chiseled pale face with a strong chin, a long nose, a large moustache that overlapped his lips, and bright sharp teeth. Instead of looking and acting like a monster, Dracula, in his uniform, proved to be a well groomed knight who spoke six languages and had fine manners; he had unmistakable sex appeal for women and superior charm for men. When asked about the impalings, he simply stated that wrongdoers impaled themselves. His dark green eyes were said to burn holes into his astounded listeners.

Each time a Turkish embassy came to Buda, Dracula was present as a powerful reminder of Matthias's negotiating power. Dressed in war regalia and sporting the visible Order of the Dragon, wearing his knightly ring over gloved fingers that arrogantly rested on the heavy crusade sword given to his father at Nuremberg, the prince stood firmly next to the Hungarian royal throne. Dracula's status at the Court of Matthias was unclear, but he was allowed to convert to Catholicism. He married the king's cousin, had two sons, and lived in his own residence in the Hungarian capital. He was invited to Matthias's coronation in 1464 where guests from all over Europe competed for a glimpse of the "Tyranum Tyranus" who sat in the first row inside the imperial cathedral.¹³ Moreover, he was offered the rank of captain in the Hungarian army and entrusted, as Hunyadi had been, with the Transylvanian borders.

But, in 1467 everything changed. Matthias wanted to replace Stefan of Moldavia with a pro-Hungarian contender; the campaign proved a disaster, and the wounded Matthias barely escaped with only a third of his army. With Transylvanians rebelling against his crown and Wallachia practically ruled by the Turks, only to be occupied by Stefan whose country was then invaded by the retaliatory Turks, the important role that Dracula played in restoring order in the Romanian lands increased with each passing day. When the Turks conducted a number of raids in southern Hungary and built a stronghold on the Sava River, Matthias's peon on the throne of Wallachia ran to the sultan for protection. The Hungarian monarch faced a frightening situation, and Dracula was the solution to the political and military crises. As the prince was in Transylvania rallying supporters for another comeback to the throne of Wallachia, Matthias offered him a much more important assignment: help him recover Bosnia from the Turks. Dracula performed beyond any expectations when, disguised as a Janissary officer, he captured at least four fortified cities. Each of his victories was followed by the impaling and massacring of Turks, actions that brought his name back into European news. He inspired Pope Sixtus IV to initiate another crusade for which the Venetians pledged their

fleet. Furthermore, the best way for Matthias to demonstrate his dedication to the Christian cause proved to be by patronizing the Turk-hater, Dracula. Because he became the cousin-in-law and the right hand of the Hungarian king, Dracula was allowed to settle in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu.

By the end of January 1476, the Hungarian Diet had endorsed his candidacy for the throne of Wallachia, held for the fourth time by Prince Laiota (from the Danesti family) who replaced Radu the Handsome who died of syphilis. Dracula again proved his loyalty to Stefan when he led a Transylvanian army to help his relative push the Turks out of Moldavia. Both cousins scored a major victory on September 6, and the Turks were forced to retreat to their Danubian strongholds. Many offered their mercenary services to the welcoming Laiota. Dracula had succeeded in gaining the trust and support of the suspicious Saxons, but only after he had agreed to cancel his previous heavy taxation of the German merchants. The frightened Laiota pledged his loyalty to the Ottoman Empire, which infuriated Matthias, the Transylvanians, and Prince Stefan of Moldavia.

By November of that year, Dracula and Stephen Bathory, now the voievode of Transylvania, led an army of twenty-five thousand troops into Wallachia. They crushed Prince Laiota's army of eighteen thousand, mostly Turks, and killed at least half of them not far from the Orația fortress where the royal treasure was hidden. The victors occupied Targoviste on November 6, and some of them marched towards București to join the army of fifteen thousand Moldavians under Prince Stefan. Ten days later, these combined forces defeated another of Laiota's armies, and Vlad III became the Wallachian dominor for the third time, taking residence in the new capital. With their mission accomplished, all the foreign soldiers except the mercenaries left for their homelands, and only a small garrison of two hundred Moldavians remained to safeguard Dracula. King Matthias took credit for the victories and rushed to announce them to Pope Sixtus IV, who was thrilled and bestowed the title of "Athlete of Christ" on Stefan of Moldavia for his anti-Ottoman victories, including the one at Vaslui in 1475.

But things went from bad to worse when at the end of November the re-installed voievode signed a letter to the Saxons with: *Io, Vlad, voievod si domn a toata tara Ungrovalahiei* (I, Vlad, Lord and Voievode of the whole country of Hungro-Wallachia). This suggested that part of Transylvania was his as well. Furthermore, he named the Brasovians "the good and sweet friends of my reign,"¹⁴ a message that could not have been more pleasing in that it announced his third rule. It turned out to be the ultimate unpardonable mistake. Dracula had made clear that he was their despot despite his obvious need for money and soldiers from Transylvania. And he continued to impale his

enemies—undeniable proof that little had changed. When Mehmed learned that Dracula had no army to speak of, he ordered an immediate invasion of Wallachia with București as the main target. Once again Laiota's forces began expanding; they set up a camp of six thousand men only a stone's throw from the capital. Equestrian patrols from both camps spied on each other and engaged in brief mêlées.

Knowing that Laiota was anxiously waiting for the Turkish army to arrive, Dracula decided to pulverize the enemy camp and kill his rival before he became too strong. Taking advantage of a foggy day, the prince put on a Turkish uniform and set out on a reconnaissance mission. As Dracula and his small squadron rode through an open field, they encountered local Wallachian peasants trying to retrieve animals that had been stolen by Laiota's soldiers. Unwilling to get involved in the distracting melee, the prince climbed onto a heap of dirt so he would be able to spot the location of the adversary camp. Suddenly a spear landed next to him, and arrows wounded his horse and struck his mail tunic, which was covered by a large Turkish mantle. Peasants armed with axes and pitch forks charged from all directions, trying to kill the "Turkish officer." Dracula spurred his horse forward, then backward and sideways in an effort to dodge the blows. He kept swinging his Toledo saber, trying to gain time until his bodyguards came to rescue him. Forced to kill the attackers closest to him, he vainly screamed in Romanian about his true identity. Ironically, a Turkish patrol saw "their" officer in danger and dashed to protect Dracula, who was able to gallop into the fog. What happened next is not known and remains enfolded in the fog of history.

What is known is that after Christmas, Dracula's decapitated body was found by his bodyguards among some four hundred dead warriors from both camps. Only ten Moldavians returned to their country to tell the horror story. King Matthias was unaware of these events and most probably reassured Pope Sixtus and the Doge of Venice that Prince Dracula was continuing his successful crusade, while Dracula's body was buried on the island of Snagov. His head was preserved in ice and presented to Mehmed II in Constantinople. It was promptly impaled on the tip of a lance and placed in front of the sultan's palace for all to see. The most evil *Ghiaur* (Infidel), Prince Kaziglu, the Impaler, was dead.

Born under the sign of Capricorn, Prince Vlad III—Dracula—was a few days short of forty-five years of age when he died. So ended the life of an unruly prince whose grand visions were equaled by cruel deeds that he justified by claiming they were necessary to achieve his goals. The Italian humanist, Filippo Buonaccorsi-Callimachus, called him *maximum illum Imperatorem et Ducem suum Vladislaus Draculum* (the greatest emperor and lord, his Vlad

Dracula).¹⁵ His epitaph might read, “The Last Crusader,” which indeed was the character of this prince who seemed born to fight. No grave or tomb would ever be made for him.

Dracula would forever be remembered in history for his impalings, even though this form of justice was merely one example of the savagery of the Middle Ages. Today, his life and actions serve as evidence that only the primeval fear of violent retribution could convince the people of the Balkans to obey the law and create any kind of social order. Despite revulsion at the horror of impalement, modern Romanians are immensely proud of their medieval Vlad Tepes (Vlad the Impaler) both because he was so determined to keep his nation independent and because he struggled to build an ideal Christian society in Wallachia.

While his crusade was ignored by the western powers, it managed to inspire many small countries to take up arms against Ottoman domination of Eastern Europe. Eventually each of the nations in the Balkan area claimed its own version of Prince Dracula, a determined hero who tried to do right under conditions in which friends and enemies were instantly interchangeable and only blind ambition posed a challenge to impossible odds.

NOTES

1. Impalement was a punishment practiced by the Persians and Turks to inspire terror and fear in rebels, just as the Romans used crucifixion. As a public display designed to discourage disobedience, it was a horrifying symbol of absolute power which had a chilling effect on both the population and enemies. For Dracula it was a way to make known his royal message: “This can happen to anyone” who was not willing to behave accordingly to royal wishes.

2. Mircea Dogaru, *Dracula: mit și realitate istorică (Dracula: Myth and Historical Reality)* (Bucharest: Editura Ianus, 1993), 236.

3. Dogaru, *Dracula: mit*, 129.

4. Dogaru, *Dracula: mit*, 236.

5. Radu R. Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, *Dracula: Prince of Many Faces, His Life and His Times* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 134, 137.

6. Florescu and McNally, *Dracula*, 137.

7. N. Stoicescu, *Vlad Tepes* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1978), 122.

8. Stoicescu, *Vlad Tepes*, 127.

9. Florescu and McNully, *Dracula: Prince*, 148.

10. Dogaru, *Dracula: mit*, 213.

11. A village named Vlad Tepesh/Impaler is still on the Romanian map.

12. The German emperor became Dracula’s biggest fan, reading to his guests from the *Story of a Bloodthirsty Madman Called Dracula of Wallachia*, as told by Brother Jacob, a monk who had barely escaped impalement as a beggar in the capital

of Targoviste. A printer from Vienna turned his story into the second bestselling book after the Bible; artists sketched the horrors and troubadours sang about Dracula. This all benefited Dracula, who in spite of the bloody image, was often invited from the Solomon Tower prison to the king's sumptuous parties where he was the a main attraction for his guests. To them, Dracula was a living legend from a mysterious land, and this was a unique occasion on which they could meet the man who had impaled more than fifty thousand people.

13. It cost Matthias eighty thousand forints and a few Hungarian counties to buy the crown from King Frederick. Finally, in 1464 he ceremoniously received the Holly Crown of Hungary.

14. Dogaru, *Dracula: mit*, 248.

15. Stoicescu, *Vlad Tepes*, 187.

Chapter Two

From Invasion to Settlement

The largest barbarian invasions of Europe took place after the year 500 largely because of the collapse of the Roman Empire and the vanishing of the Sarmatian and Scythian powers northwest of the Sea of Azov; they were possibly also influenced by climate changes in Asia. There was no longer a military force to defend the Danubian line that separated the civilized world from the eastern lands, or to push back the immense populations of invaders who had never seen a stone building, nor heard of Jesus. A relentless flood of Eurasian tribes savagely pursued each other west of the Ural Mountains, the border of Europe. With either Rome or Constantinople as their ultimate goal, they sought commercial routes that led through the prosperous cities and rich provinces of Europe (those with Latin names), which they pillaged and plundered. Essentially, the primal incentives of hunger and greed launched an age of migration that lasted five hundred years, and put the pagan and Christian worlds on a collision course that would change the demographic map of Eastern Europe and the course of world history.

The geographic configuration of the Balkan Peninsula determined the route by which the barbarians made their incursion into the South. Before discovering Roman military roads, they followed mountain valleys, most of which ran parallel, north to south, and also the course of the area's rivers, which facilitated their advance. The invading hordes set up encampments in rich pastures so that the energy of their horses might be sustained and the massive herds of animals they used for food might be fattened. These migratory caravans were made up of hunters and herdsmen who belonged to tribes that were offshoots of barbarian mega-tribes. They, in turn, were united by a shared language and common traditions; they also had a single chieftain. There was continual friction among the tribes, often causing their migrations to be re-routed so the tribes could deal with immediate problems; however, they instantly united when they were faced

with external threats. Typically those threats came from Byzantine armies, but there were also frequent engagements with native settlers determined to hold onto their native lands and defend their families and possessions. Often, the reputed savagery of the invaders, as well as the confrontations themselves, caused many of the native people to move away from the invaded areas and resettle elsewhere. This gave the barbarians immediate access to already prosperous regions. Yet, in the absence of a self-sustaining economy, the settlements claimed by the usurpers were doomed to vanish eventually. They lacked the stability that went with civilized living: their main source of revenue was booty, and their warriors, not laborers, provided for the communities' families. So, the invaders charged ever onward, marking their migratory route by burning dwellings and killing the conquered population.

In the early days of the barbarian invasions, the wild raiders, who were unable to conquer fortified cities, overran the countryside's native settlements. They showed no humanity even in victory—massacring, looting, and raping wherever they went, both for the thrill of it and as proof that their raids were successful. Captives for whom they could not collect ransom were murdered because the intruders did not need extra mouths to feed. Indeed, they regarded such actions as heroic. They forced ancient nations into bloody submission and occupied the lands they had claimed by the sword and summarily declared them their own.¹ Treaties might be made by these savages, but they would not be honored. Behaving unpredictably, except for their cunning, sadism, and capacity for deception, they destroyed whatever they could not steal from both friend and foe. The modern world might call them masters of psychological warfare for they were enormously adept at inducing mortal fear in native populations who had thus far felt safe and secure in Pax Romana. Even though none of the invading hordes, composed of the clans described below, exceeded six hundred thousand, the level of their savagery made them seem more numerous when the trickle of their infiltrations turned into a flood of invasions. Most of these men were physically larger than Western Europeans. Dressed in furs, they were certainly better horsemen, and their ability to deal with hardship, especially on the battlefield, seemed endless. They were basically primitive hunters with an inborn—and cultivated—killer instinct; daring and courageous warriors, they were greatly feared for their lethal efficiency. They readily adapted to any living conditions and all forms of deprivation while they charged forward to conquer their next meal. They lived in extended, polygamous families and had numerous children, but no property or personal possessions except weapons and horses. Death in battle was considered an honor, and they readily volunteered for that supreme sacrifice. Byzantine troops, on the other hand, were primarily mercenaries who wanted to live a good life and retire in comfort.

As in previous centuries, the barbarians approached the Balkan Peninsula “like tributaries joining a river from all directions” and “streamed towards us [Byzantines] in full force, mostly through Dacia,”² as described by historian Anna Comnena, when writing about the mountain passes and river valleys of what is today Romania. Because the Danube River constituted a major natural obstacle to accessing more southerly areas, many barbarian hordes, like the Gepids, settled for a while in Dacia or neighboring Pannonia (today’s Hungary). Here they regrouped and then attacked the lands ruled by Byzantium, areas that made up what would later be known as the Byzantine Empire. The Balkan mega state, which covered a greater geographic area when it was the Roman Eastern Empire, was ruled from Constantinople by so-called Roman emperors from long-standing royal dynasties. It extended over three continents, and its enviable riches attracted predatory nomads from the Don and Volga River areas and beyond. In the beginning, the Byzantine armies were capable of forcing the savage raiders to retreat. But when the invading warriors were followed by their entire families and caravans with their belongings, the Byzantines faced a huge demographic problem: these barbarians—unlike Attila with his hordes—did not run back to their bases after engaging in their acts of plunder; rather, they intended to stay in the areas they claimed. Moreover, they did not invade from the sea, which would have made defense much easier; they arrived by land from ever new directions and invaded over vast areas. It was impossible for the Byzantine army to be everywhere at the same time in order to crush the barbarian attacks. Moreover, the attacks were marked by sheer savagery, combined with speed of pursuit and complicated withdrawal maneuvers followed by massive charges. Furthermore, even when the barbarian warriors were killed in battle and the rest of population was resettled at a far distance, the high birth rate of the barbarians and their quick military recovery presented an ongoing and increasing danger to the imperial command. An example of the military situation that developed as a result of one of the first devastating barbarian incursions into the Balkan Peninsula was described as follows:

...Sirmium [Mitroovitza] and the country around it is under the Gepids. But everywhere, to be brief, is absolutely deserted. Some perished in the war, others by the disease and famine which come together with war. As for Illyria [Albania] and the whole of Thrace [European Turkey], which would include all from the Ionian gulf as far as the suburbs of Byzantium, having in it Greece and the area of the Chersonese—Huns, Sclavenes, and Antæ overran it nearly every year from the beginning of Justinian’s reign and did terrible damage to the inhabitants. In each invasion I believe that there were more than two hundred thousand Romans killed or enslaved there, so that the Scythian desert came to extend over the whole area.³

The invading hordes included:

Gepids. The tribes named Getipaides (children of Goths) by the Greeks proved to be strong enough to defeat a Roman army as they took over some cities and areas ruled by Constantinople. These threatening events prompted Emperor Justinian (r. 527–565) to play some of the barbarians off against others, and he allowed the powerful Lombards to settle in Noricum and Pannonia. As might have been expected, the Germanic tribes turned against the Gepids (who had once defeated the Huns), but in the year 552 Gepidia, which had previously covered western Dacia and eastern Pannonia (Hungary), was drastically reduced in both population and living space. Since they were too busy to resettle around the Sirmium region, the Gepids paid little attention to the arrival of another migratory people, the Avars.

Avars. The Tartaric/Turkish Avars/Abars, a branch of the Altaic tribes which had originated in what is today Turkestan, were named “Abaroi” by the Romans and “Huns” by the Franks. They were the same people but with different hairstyles: the first wore two braids down their backs; the second had their heads shaved except for a single lock of hair on top. Formidable fighters, the Avars were skilled at equestrian warfare, and they were also able to use hunting bows to rapidly shoot well aimed arrows. They retained the pagan ritual of burying their dead warriors with their cherished horses, further evidence of their military might.

In 561 they settled in the Dacian provinces of Bessarabia and Dobrudja, pushing the Bulgars and Slavs south of the Danube. The Avars destroyed Gepidia east of the Tisza River and occupied Pannonia. It became part of Avaria which then contained tribes of Croats, Serbians, and other Slavs. The less numerous Avars were quick to subdue most of these docile and dislocated tribes and led them in carrying out devastating raids inside the Byzantine Empire—that is, until Justinian I paid them an annual tribute in exchange for peace. Each time the tribute was cut off, however, the Avars with their Slavs (who received a small share of the plunder) would storm the Greek lands, inducing terror in the Byzantine population. This was particularly the case in 626 when the Avars, who were allied with the Persians, attacked Constantinople’s massive walls, only to be defeated; thereafter, Avar military power was permanently diminished. This taught the Slavs and other barbarians a valuable lesson: blackmailing weak emperors was a useful tactic. From that point onward, barbarian invasions were motivated by the prospect of easily obtaining tributary payments through intimidation. By the beginning of the eighth century, the Avar Empire had been reduced to an area in the western Carpathian region; in 796, it was destroyed altogether by the combined attacks of the Franks and Bulgars. Some Avars escaped into the Dacian lands of Banat, Crisana, and Transylvania, and most of the survivors were absorbed

into the oncoming waves of Slavs and Magyars. The Avars never created a lasting state, but they were crucial in dispersing other barbarian groups across the various areas of the Balkans, and in creating further chaos and conflict.

Slavs. None of the migratory peoples appeared on the scene as suddenly and numerously as did the Slavs, a name that encompassed many ethnically diverse tribes of varied origins. These northern Indo-Europeans, commonly known as Slaveni, provided the basic Pan-Slavic language. They seemed to come from all of the regions of Eastern Europe—from the Baltic Sea, the Pripet/Pripyat Marshes, and the Vistula Basin. However, the majority of their population was under the leadership of the Antes, a powerful and huge tribe that dominated Eastern Europe in the fifth century after the Goths and Huns had evacuated it. Their main homeland encompassed the vastness of southern Russia between the Bug and Volga rivers. Dislocated by the powerful Khazars, they slowly drifted westward with their women and children in oxen-pulled wagons. Most often these proto-agrarian people occupied lands abandoned by other migrants, mainly Goths. This pattern caused some tribes to shift to areas east of the Carpathian Mountains.

The Slavs spoke a basic *lingua franca* of their own, which evolved into distinctive western, southern, and eastern dialects. Since they had no concept of centralized leadership, each tribe conducted its own independent raids. After establishing some temporary farming settlements in former Dacia (today's Banat and Dobrudja), they continued to expand their numbers and ultimately spread farther west and south. They were armed with axes and nail-studded clubs, and shot poisoned arrows to increase the fighting power of their many foot soldiers. Unlike other barbarians, however, they possessed nautical skills; their warriors could use boats and barges for transportation and so cross any major river and penetrate deep into the Balkan mainland. For this reason they were able to occupy regions like Dacian Moesia (Bulgaria) and Illyria. The lack of unity among the Slavic tribes caused them to be easily subdued by the socially superior Avars. When Constantinople ceased paying its annual subsidies, the Avars made use of the Slavs as “bulldozer” troops in their various invasions.

With no other place to go, the Slavs followed the Avars and penetrated deeply into the Balkan Peninsula as far as the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea; eventually, they invaded the Peloponnesus. Although they were successful at first, they would be pushed beyond the Danube by General Priscus in the years 592 and 597. In addition to being defeated, the Slavs were scared off by the Black Plague. Unlike most other predatory migrants, they became agriculturists and wanted to gain a foothold in any land they could. When the Byzantine armies became ever less capable of repelling barbarian attacks, the Slavs settled in farming areas which were already occupied and either killed

the natives or forced them to vacate villages and towns. Most affected by this were the Vlachs (Vlachians or Wallachians), offspring of the Romanized Dacians who lived south of the Danube, since they were forced to accept the unwanted Slavs as lazy and rapacious neighbors. Because they were unable to cross over the mountains where the Vlachian shepherds ruled supreme, the Slavs occupied the lower lands around this area. Soon their settlements, named *sclaviniae*, became major strongholds in Moesia, Illyricum, and Thracia. Since they were not under any sort of imperial control, these settlements were the precursors to Slavic statehood.

The Avars and Slavs continued to challenge the military power of the Byzantine emperors and, by taking advantage of their internal and external crises, they almost captured Greece itself. When Avar domination was vanquished and the Byzantine army was in continuous decline, the Slavs became bolder and more aggressive. John of Ephesus, a contemporary who was not from the Balkans, commented thusly on this new set of conditions:

Three years after the death of Justin II under Tiberius [i.e., 581] the cursed nation of Slavs campaigned, overran all Hellas, the provinces of Thessaly and all of Thrace, taking many towns and castles, laid waste, burned, pillaged, and seized the country. And dwelt there in full liberty and without fear, as if it belonged to them. This went on for four years, and until the present, because the emperor was involved with the Persian war and the armies were in the east.⁴

This takeover, almost Biblical in its proportions, allowed the countless number of Slavic groups north of the Danube, who had long awaited such an opportunity, to journey southward in search of a place to settle.

Bulgars. The void left by the Avar evacuation was filled by the daring, migratory Bulgars, who were a mixture of Mongols and Turks with a touch of Ugric (Finnish) blood. While historian Procopius referred to the Bulgarians as “Huns,”⁵ many Proto-Bulgarian tribes were once part of Attila’s invasion of Europe and, implicitly, of the Balkans. Moreover, after Attila’s death, these tribes rightly identified themselves as Hunic and temporarily settled between what are today the Kuban region and the Caspian Sea. Eventually, they were displaced by the Iranian Khazars. While they were there, though, some of the Bulgar tribes led by khans (princes) were under the rule of Turks; some under the Avars; and some leaders of the Onogur tribe were even Christianized. Many of them ended up above the Danube delta. After they swarmed over southern Ukraine, the tribe of the Kuturgur Hun Bulgars finally settled in Bessarabia; by 582 they invaded Wallachia, after which they headed toward the Danube into the Byzantine- possessed lands.⁶ When they tried to cross south of the Danube, Emperor Constantine IV (r. 668–685) campaigned against them, but an attack of gout kept him from optimally

leading his capable army to destroy them. When he retreated, the suffering emperor could never have guessed that he might have altered the fate of the entire Balkan Peninsula if only he had finished off the Bulgars before it was too late to do so.

Their unexpected victory drew the Bulgars into the middle of the Vlach population of Moesia, which was had already been settled by Slavic tribes. The Bulgar warlords wasted no time in gaining control over the loosely organized Slavs. By exploiting the Slavic military power, they developed an alliance that proved to be a formidable menace to the Byzantines. Soon the Bulgars made non-negotiable territorial claims. This, in turn, forced them to adopt the Slavic language in order to maintain their position of dominance. These two radically different groups shared aspirations of expansion and in 681 founded the First Bulgarian Kingdom. It was soon to be recognized by the Byzantines, who gifted them with additional territories and an annual tribute in exchange for peace. Like previous invaders, the Bulgars enjoyed the fruits of others' labors and brought with them essentially nothing that would improve life in the Balkans. Countless numbers of natives were massacred or taken captive for ransom, and millions fled the blind fury of the invaders. Moreover, these actions set a trend that would be followed by the next migratory tribe—the Serbs.

Serbs. Initially the Serbs were a Turkish people of Iranian extraction. Along with the Serboi (identified by Claudius Ptolemy as being in Sarmatia on the Lower Volga) and Sarban tribes, they had migrated from the Caucasus toward Europe. Traveling possibly farther than any other tribes in search of a new homeland, the Serbs ended up settling throughout the Danubian basin until the sixth century. At that point they were pushed westward by the Avars; by the 600s they had settled in so-called White Serbia on the Elbe River, arriving at the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers. From there they made predatory incursions into the Balkan Peninsula where Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641), who was unwilling to deal with yet another barbarian threat, granted them a region in western Macedonia that was renamed Serblia. In exchange, he wanted peace with the newly arrived immigrants. But that area was too small for the many Serb tribes who had fought their way back into lower Pannonia and Dardania. These areas were still controlled by the Avars. In fact, the Dacian legacy was so strong there that the Serbs bore the name Tribalii—that of a Celtic tribe which had been Dacianized a thousand years earlier. The restless Serbs battled the Slavs who had settled on the Drina River and then moved again towards Dalmatia where they finally established a stronghold named Ras, after the region of Raska (north of today's Albania), and became known as Rascians.

As their population and their power expanded, and as still more tribes moved westward in search of a homeland, the Serbs extended their domination to the

area that is today Croatia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro—at the expense of the Slavic tribes already there. By the year 630, they had conquered Singidunum (from Latin, *Segedunum*/strong fort) and renamed it Beligrad (the White City; later Beograd/Belgrade). This event put them on the map as permanent barbarian settlers named “Skje” by their Vlach neighbors. A second influx of migratory Serbs and Croats divided this land and its population among themselves; they then had to learn the Slavic language. These new powerful tribal symbioses finally brought the Avars’ regional supremacy to an end.

Croats were believed to be of Iranian origin, but they may have their origins in a group of Sarmatians who were dislocated by the Huns. They were unfairly considered Slavs and had a good deal of Ostrogothic blood. They found themselves in the midst of a sea of Slaveni in the huge Pripet Marsh area. The Hrvat tribe, with its own distinctive language, was one of the first barbarian groups to establish its own White Croatian domain, named Chrobatia, in the Vistula region; some Belocroats/White Croats settled north of Bavaria. The Czechs forced many Croatian tribes to migrate across the Carpathians where they were pushed in diverse directions by other barbarian tribes until they eventually found refuge on the Dalmatian coast. Most likely, they met up with another branch of the Hrvat tribes who had already settled above and around Ragusa (Dubrovnik) at the beginning of the seventh century. They had been granted that land by Emperor Heraclius on the condition that they fight off the Avars and other invading barbarians. They did just that, and by defeating the Avars, who retreated in 626 from their siege of Constantinople, the Croats earned the right to claim part of Illyricum as their homeland.

Other Western Slavs. Bohemia and Moravia were inhabited by the Celts and Germans who in the sixth century were displaced by Slavic tribes—mainly the Czechs and Moravians who belonged to the tribes of Wends (the western Slavs). They were quickly overrun by the Antes (eastern Slavs) and Avars until the year 631 when the revolt of Samo took place. A Frank by birth, this merchant valued the military potential of the local tribes and helped them regain their freedom and national identity, which was based on higher values and more ethical standards than that of the other tribes. The Slovenes/Slovenians branched out from the original Slavini of Vistula and, after being forced in all directions by the eastern and western tribes of Europe, raided the Byzantine provinces up to the border of Greece. In 588, Emperor Maurice (r. 582–602) allowed them to settle on the Dalmatian coast at the north end of the Adriatic Sea. This proved to be one of the best locations from which they could maintain their dominance since it was out of the path of the other chaotic barbarian invasions. Eventually, the Slovenians became allies of convenience with Constantinople, where their mercenaries were included in the imperial army. Justinian II was even comfortable with having thirty thousand

Slovenians serve as his bodyguard unit, and their language was commonly heard in the Byzantine capital.

Up to this point, the Byzantine emperors had been content to watch one group of troublesome barbarians decimate another and thereby prevent other hordes of Asians from attacking the imperial provinces south of the Danube River. In 635 Kubrat, the Bulgarian chieftain, successfully battled the Avars and further reduced their military power and dominance of southern Dacia and lower Pannonia. As a result, the Bulgars became even stronger. When the emperors found they couldn't win at fighting the Bulgars, they bribed them, and so turned them against the other barbarian tribes who sought an equal (or greater) share of Byzantine riches. Describing Justinian's diplomacy and its effect, Procopius wrote: "He kept lavishing great sums destined for the state on any Huns he came into contact with; as a result it came about that the land of the Romans was exposed to constant attacks. Once these barbarians had tasted Roman gold they would not any longer keep off the road which led to it."⁷ Indeed, no payment was sufficient to satisfy the greed and rapaciousness of the barbarians once they had been exposed to the plentitude of life in Europe. Invasions continued from still other tribes.

Pechenegs, who were Turkish tribes from east of the Urals and the Yenisey River, found themselves pushed (in a sort of domino effect) by successive migratory waves until they settled on the Don River within the Khazars' lands. At the end of the tenth century, adverse circumstances brought them into what was formerly Eastern Dacia. They then forced their way into Moldavia and settled there, dominating the area until middle of the twelfth century. Pressure from the much stronger Cumans caused many of the Pecheneg tribes to migrate again and offer their military services to the newly established Magyars along the mid-Danube. Renamed *Besenyos* (Eagles) by the Magyars, the aimless Pechenegs persisted in raiding the northern Balkans and even tried to gain ground in Thracia during the reign of Alexius in 1086. They were repulsed, tried again to find a place of their own, and were driven out multiple times by the Cumans who displaced them still farther toward the Black Sea. Because they retained confidence in their might, the Pechenegs invaded the Byzantine Empire one more time. Traveling with full caravans loaded with their families and possessions, their intention was to settle on the Maritza River. But in 1091 at the Battle of Levounion/Lebunium, the combined armies of the Byzantines, Cumans, and Vlachs delivered a mortal blow to the eighty thousand Pecheneg warriors. Instead of finding a new home, they were slaughtered en masse, civilians included. The survivors escaped by crossing the Danube and moving into Wallachia where they regrouped with other related tribes. In 1122 they invaded Bulgaria again, but history repeated itself—a wholesale massacre occurred, this time at Beroia. The Pechenegs

never recovered and this marked the end of their threat to any other group in the Balkans. Some of the surviving warriors enlisted in the Byzantine army, but the rest melted into the Bulgar, Hungarian, and Vlachian population.

Another related Turkish group consisted in *Patzinaks* tribes who continued to migrate westward from Eurasia until they reached the Siret and Danube rivers in Moldavia. From there they carried out savage raids into the Balkans. They were often misnamed Scyths or even Sarmatians because they settled for a while on the land once occupied by those ancient people. Patzinaks were merciless raiders of the Byzantine lands especially during the reign of Isaac I (r. 1057–1059). They specialized in attacking across the frozen Danube. In most invasions they followed the Pechenegs, their stronger partners-in-crime, with whom they shared the same tragic end.

Cumans were tribal warriors who originated in Eurasian lands and came to Eastern Europe in the eleventh century. For a while, they had a foothold on lands near the Volga River. Unlike other Semitic tribes who had dark skin and eyes, the Cumans were fair skinned, blond, and blue-eyed; this set them apart from other groups and was later a source of puzzlement to historians. They looked and acted like the Scythians, and it is thought by some that they might in fact have been a lost tribe of that ancient people, renamed and forced by the Mongols into former Dacia in 1087. Indeed, their intrusion into the Byzantine Empire impressed Eustathius, Bishop of Thessalonica, based on this conjecture. He wrote in a letter to Emperor Isaac II (r. 1185–1195 and 1203–1204):

This is a people which is not stationary, and does not stay in one place, or know how to settle down, and therefore it has no institutions. It moves all over the earth and rests nowhere, and is constantly wandering. These are flying men, and hard to catch therefore, and have no cities, and know no villages, but bestiality follows in their path. Not even the vultures, that carrion-eating and loathed tribe, can be compared to these people.⁸

He compared their habits to those of wolves—“bold and greedy, the wolf knows well how to flee whenever something terrifying appears.” The bishop concluded that the Scyths/Cumans were “wild beasts among mankind” or “men among wild beasts.”⁹ However, the Scyths and Cumans were considered different people; Anna Comnena clearly stated that “the emperor’s [her father Alexius I] policy was to make use of the Scyths against the Cumans, if the latter again approached the Ister [Danube] and tried to seize territory beyond it.”¹⁰ In her view the Scyths were the Turkish Patzinaks, much likely Pechenegs, not the Cumans, whom Bishop Eustathius confused with each other; he was most probably describing Turkish invaders. There is no relation

between those whom the Byzantines called “Scyths” and ancient Scythians who melted into the Dacian population long before the Roman invasion.

The Cumans were most certainly predatory barbarians, but in Dacia they managed to co-exist peacefully with the local population. Their solid partnership with the Vlachs, who were dispersed throughout the Balkan Peninsula, points to the common language of these two people. Moreover, the arrival of additional Cumans defeated by the Kievan Rus increased their presence in what is today Romania and gave them a certain pre-eminence. Their unusual peaceful co-existence with the Daco-Romans, especially in Moldavia and Wallachia, lends credence to the speculation that the Cumans were related to them.¹¹ It is possible that, based on the physical description we are given of them, the Cumans were in fact a group leftover from the Scythian tribes who were close to the Dacians in ancient times. This would explain why they settled in the Romanian principalities for almost three centuries and kept migrant tribes of Pechenegs, Bulgars, Magyars, and Slavs at bay. They fought valiantly against the invading Mongolian Horde, but in 1238 some of their tribes were defeated and left Transylvania for Hungary. More than forty thousand families settled in the buffer zone between the Danube and Tisza rivers, where an equal number of warriors doubled the strength of King Bela’s army as it confronted the fast approaching Golden Horde. Accused of spying for the Tartars,¹² the proud Cumans migrated south of the Danube where they remained until King Bela asked them to return to Hungary; at that point, Hungary had been devastated by Mongol invasion. Many other foreign tribes also were invited to repopulate that almost empty country, and the Cumans blended with them until they vanished from the pages of history altogether.

Ukrainians and *Russians* were nonexistent in ancient Eurasia; there was no Russian or Ukrainian population—only the super tribes of Scythians and Sarmatians with their uniquely non-Slavic culture and religion. The Ukrainians descended from a combination of Sarmatians, Scandinavians, Scythians, and Antes. In view of the fact that each migratory group that arrived from Asia flooded their lands, a great deal of the blood of Avars, Goths, Huns, and Magyars must course through the veins of modern Ukrainians. However, most important for the earlier Ukrainian settlements were the Scandinavian traders, the Rus/Ros. In fact these Vikings, who crisscrossed what is today’s Russia on their riverboats, were the founders of Kiev and other important commercial settlements. Even the Moscow River was named by the Varangians (Scandinavians). They were fierce warriors and had no problem subduing the rival Slavic tribes who had migrated northwest of the Volga River. Among those Slavic tribes were the Drevlian, Polesie, Severians, and the Polian mega-tribe, all horse-breeding people who spoke a common Slavic language.

They settled around what is now Kiev, and, despite their vast numbers, relied on their Cuman and Pecheneg allies to defend them.

The Polish nation was robustly settled before the seventh century when the Slavs from the Pripet and Vistula basins began to take over the lands of what was later known as East Prussia and the region beyond it. Among these invading Slavic groups were the powerful Goplans, Lendizi, Polans/Polanians, Vistulans, and many branches of the Lechitic tribes that at one time spread out toward Ruthenia and Dacia, forming their own Lechia. But that brought them in conflict with the area's aboriginals. The Russian *Chronicle of Nestor* (from 850 to 1110) included commentary about the Volochi (Wallachians/Vlahs) attacking the Leshi tribes, forcing them to settle on the Vistula.¹³ Thus, the Polish tribes found their way to a land that suited them, safely bordered from the Russians and other eastern Slavs by the Pripet Marshes.

Four eastern nations had little or no impact on Balkan life, yet they are of historical interest because of their connection to Slavism. The *Belarusians* were preceded by the East Slavic tribes, such as the Drehovichans and Kryvichans, whose settlements formed principalities controlled by the Kievan Rus and, from the fourteenth century onward, by the dukes of Lithuania. More distinct are the Baltic tribes which were later to become consolidated into the nations of *Lithuanians* (Samogitians and Aukstaitians), *Latvians* (Latgallians), and *Estonians* (Chudes). Among other Balts were the Curonians and Selonians, excellent navigators and horsemen who sought to thwart the domination of the Vikings and the Rus. Related to them were the settlers on the Latuva River, including the Latgali, Kursi, Seli, and the ever-present Livs/Livonians. These peoples seem to have belonged to the same language group. The *Estonians*, however, were an exception; they were descendents of the settled tribes of Aestii and Fenns of Fino-Slavic origin, who eventually formed the Duchy of Estonia that was ruled by Denmark from the twelfth century onward. In all the Baltic states, German colonization began with the conquest of Livonia (of Livonians and Selonians) in 1201. Additionally, the founding of Riga left an unmistakable cultural legacy, one that still remains visible in the city's architecture.

Magyar is the westernized name of the Fino-Ugric/Ugrian speaking tribes of Modjars/Megyeri/Mogeri, a non-Indo-European people. The forefathers of the Hungarians refer to Ogors/Ugrs and Onogurs, who are known to have slowly migrated from the region of the Ob River and the Urals to the steppes east of the Volga River. There they formed the loosely organized settlement of Lebedia at the end of the ninth century. The Pechenegs, however, forced them west of the Dnieper where they formed another temporary settlement under the control of the Khazars and Pechenegs. Unable to co-exist with any outside authority, the homeless Magyars, led by their elected chieftain Arpad,

entered Lower Danube and, looking for easy loot, shortly settled in Bessarabia in 895. When in 796 Charlemagne destroyed the Avar Empire in Pannonia, he had never heard of Magyars or Hungarians. They were constantly being pushed westward by other invading barbarians, such as the Bulgars, and so crossed above the mountainous area of Dacia and in 896 settled in the hospitable pastures west of the Tisza River. Arpad (r. 895–907) of the Onogur tribes succeeded in uniting most of the Proto-Hungarian hordes into a tribal federation. Desperate for plunder and more land, these pagans invaded the Danubian Bulgarian Empire, but were thoroughly defeated; the Magyars regrouped in Pannonia to restore their military power.

In 906, the Magyars attacked the Moravian principedom where their destructive rampaging put an end to that Christian state. Suffering from famine, they next tried to settle in Slovakia. Arpad then led them back to eastern Pannonia, which at that point was occupied by the Bulgars and Pechenegs. After a violent struggle, they reclaimed part of “liberated” Pannonia as their homeland. The Latins collectively called them *Hungarus*, clearly a name for *Hungaria/Hungary*. Part of this Hungarian coalition was the *Szekely*, an uprooted Scythian tribe who interbred with the Avars and other Mongolian invaders, only to eventually join the Magyars in their journey throughout Eastern Europe. The *Szekely* founded their own settlement along the Tisza River, while the Slavs of Pannonia migrated farther westward and settled in what is today Slovenia. The Magyars continued their predatory missions and succeeded in forcing Emperor Leo VI to pay them tribute. Raiding westward, they sacked Basel in 917; they also burned Bremen and then invaded Bavaria and Burgundy, cutting an immense swath of destruction wherever they went. Their chain of aggressive actions even extended as far west as present-day Holland, where they were suddenly halted by the Croatian army led by King Tomislav. Again in 955 the Germans of Otto I pulverized the Magyar hordes in the Battle of Lechfeld and forced them back into Pannonia. However, a large segment of the Magyar population was left behind as vassals of the Khazars between the Caspian and Black seas. When the Russians defeated the Khazars in 965, the Magyars (many of whom had adopted Judaism) migrated west of the Tisza River and settled among other Magyars.

Since they were people of an equestrian culture, the primitively armed Magyars could not battle the armies of the heavily armored knights, and the latter were able to at last put a stop to the savage raids on the West. The Magyars then turned toward Transylvania, which was well defended by its Cuman settlers. Thus Pannonia became the site of the Hungarians’ permanent yet chaotic settlement, one that was plagued by dynastic instability and tensions with external powers. Bishop Otto of Freysing spoke of the Hungarians as “ferocious” at the time of the crusades. “Their eyes are sunken, their stature

is short, their behavior wild, their language barbarous, so that one can either accuse fate or marvel at divine patience for having permitted these monsters the possession of an enchanting land.”¹⁴

Their type of pseudo-settlement required serious enforcement of societal rules, so the Hungarian kings of the twelfth century invited Germans to migrate to the area along the Transylvanian border, one too often transgressed by the Cumans and other barbarians. The Szekely tribes, who were trustworthy as frontier guards, were not strong enough for the task; the German Saxons joined the Szekely (whom they called Szekler), and, for a time fulfilled their military obligation. But, encouraged by the Cumans to abandon their assigned duties, the Szekely began to inch their way into the new land of Siebenbürgen in Transylvania.

During the next century, a second migratory wave of Germans, coming from as far as Bavaria, settled on the Carpathian border with Moldavia and Wallachia. There they established large and prosperous settlements that soon grew into strong, fortified communities in the heart of the Romanian principalities. The Romanians called the Szekely “Secui” (from the Latin *Seculi*) and the Saxons “Sasi/Sashi.” The latter opened a corridor through Hungary to the Holy Roman Empire and the rest of Western Europe, and many Magyars used it to leave the barren Hungarian steppe to settle in immensely rich Transylvania. In time, cities came to carry dual names in German and Hungarian, such as Brasov/Kronstadt/Brasso, Cluj/Klausenburg/Kolozsvár, and Sibiu/Hermanstadt/Nagyszeben. All were built upon the original Dacian foundations as they had been upgraded by the Cumans. These settlements proved to be so sheltered from the stormy military and political events of the rest of Europe that Hungarians who immigrated to the area came to believe Transylvania was their real homeland.

Turks also intensely colonized the Byzantine Empire. After the end of the White Hun Empire (420–552) in the Far East, they approached the Balkans, but unlike other invaders, they arrived from the opposite side of the peninsula. The loosely organized tribes of Turks became part of the Seljuk State and converted to Islam. Doing so gave them a religious identity and united them militarily. The name “Turk” meant “strong” in their earlier language, and the tribes that migrated into Anatolia proved to be just that. Named “Turci” by the Byzantines, they inflicted a decisive defeat on the imperial army in 1071 at Manzikert (Malazgirt) and enjoyed a similar victory in 1176 near Denizli. After this point, Byzantine control of Anatolia was practically eliminated. Despite the fact that the Mongol invasion essentially ended the Seljuk Empire, a capable ruler, Osman I, put the rivalry among Turkish tribes to good use by redirecting their military energy. This enabled him to extend the borders of his new state to the Strait of the Bosphorus across from Constantinople.

When Byzantine power was eroded by ever greater turmoil within the Empire, the Ottomans were invited by the emperors to help repossess the lands occupied by the barbarian settlements. The Turkish army acquired new confidence and took advantage of the weak imperial army to capture Gallipoli in 1354 and Adrianople (renamed Edirne) in 1361. This gave the Ottomans their first official foothold in the Balkans—an achievement that had important ramifications for the future of Eastern Europe. It led to more conquests, and the Turks extended their suzerainty into Bulgaria and permanently settled in the Byzantine Empire. The Turks had no moral or ethical doubts about taking over Balkan lands since the Ionians of Anatolia and the Hellenes of Greece had expanded across two continents. This, too, was the situation with the Thracian tribes who had lived for two thousand years on both sides of the Bosphorus. An interest in migration seems to have been in the Turkish blood; settlement, however, was an Ottoman policy.

Gypsies and *Jews*, two other migratory peoples who also came to Eastern Europe, did not impose themselves on existing settlements with the sword, but rather by providing help to everyone. They never constituted a nation; nor did they have a homeland anywhere else in Europe. They became an international people with a marked ability to survive. While the Gypsies were considered barbarians because of their heritage and unique behaviors, the Jews were acknowledged for spreading civilization through trade and for their dedication to scholarly work. Nevertheless, both peoples stood apart from the majority of the population in the Balkans because their looks and clothing were different from those of the other ethnic groups.

Gypsies (also known as Tsygani) arrived later in the Balkan Peninsula. They were brought there from the Afghan-Persian Empire by the Ottomans in the fourteenth century as blacksmiths and toolmakers for their armies. These dark-skinned nomads with Indian features spoke a Hindu related language that originated from the Baluchistan region. They became extremely important to the Turkish army when it began to rely on firearms, including the cannon. The Gypsy caravans with their iron workers and portable forges were essential to servicing the new weapons. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman expansion into the Balkan Peninsula brought with it Gypsy camps, and Gypsies were introduced into the occupied territories as part of the garrisoned troops. Vlad Dracula had the distinction of bringing them north of the Danube into his Wallachian Principdom because he wanted to use artillery and other firearms in his campaigns. Because they were skilled as coppersmiths, tinsmiths, and jewelry makers, the Gypsies soon left their military camps and drifted into civilian life where their skills were also in demand. They also became renowned as fortune tellers and performers of witchcraft, but most of all as talented musicians. Nomadic by nature, they did

not assimilate into any mainstream population and tended to adopt the host ethnicities from which they borrowed words for their vocabulary. They were not allowed to own land and so drifted on the fringes of communities and ended up in almost every part of Eastern Europe, forming their own patches of "Tsygania." They were often accused of thievery, creating bad omens, and other illegal practices, and so developed a mixed reputation and that still accompanies them.

The Jewish Diaspora in Europe began with the Roman occupation of Jerusalem in the year 70. The Jewish presence in Western Europe would increase dramatically as international trade became a vital necessity. The Hebrew language, religion, diet, and practice of circumcision separated the Jews from the Christian population, and they lived in tightly knit communities apart from the goyim/gentile world. As early as the seventh century, Jews played an important role in the trade carried on by the Byzantine Empire. Jewish settlers of the ninth and tenth centuries found there a welcoming land in which to apply their mercantile skills; and, their prosperity attracted new waves of Jewish migrants. They were also keen to identify the demands of the local population and became known for providing money to princes and kings who were always in need of it. These skills allowed the Jews to extend their shtettles/settlements to every corner of the Balkans, but it was the lands closer to the West, such as Dalmatia, Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland, that most attracted them. Later, the crusaders brought more Jews south of the Danube River, and they settled in the major cities of the Byzantine Empire.

The first major Jewish influx into the Balkans followed their expulsion from Western Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the same time as the Ashkenazi Jews migrated to Eastern Europe. Their artisanship in the making of beautiful dresses and jewelry and their craftsmanship in producing utilitarian goods were complimented by their skill at peddling and money lending. This economic and diplomatic proficiency had a strong impact on other less sophisticated settlers. Given that they had virtually no serious competition (except for the Armenians and Greeks), the Jews prospered so greatly in the Balkans that they attracted the envy of the others. The result was pogroms and royal decrees to stop "the killers of Christ" from occupying top administrative positions that were sold to the highest bidder. However, Bulgarian and Romanian principalities continually provided safe havens for Jews who would flee social and political threats and prosecution, but return when circumstances were favorable.

In conclusion, happy people do not migrate; hungry and uprooted people with nothing to lose are willing to take risks and look for a better place to live, even at the expense of others. So it was that in the space of five hundred years, each barbarian incursion created a chain of violent incidents in East-

ern Europe that transformed farmlands into blood-soaked fields and reduced prosperous cities to ghostly ruins. The bellicose Avars wanted only to participate in the next act of pillage and plunder and return to their camps, but the more pastorally inclined Slavs sought land and recognition of their settlements. In the course of this lengthy and brutal tidal shift in the locations of various peoples, migratory families came to be clans of blood relatives who, in turn, belonged to ethnic tribes which had merged into larger tribal formations defined by race. Eventually local tribes came to form super-tribes, and these in turn were united into a tribal coalition. In sum, these vast and diverse hordes of peoples evolved into tribal confederations, leagues, states, and, eventually, nations, each being greatly influenced by its native populations. The latter were most often culturally and religiously advanced, and therefore civilized the incoming pagan invaders. These numerous and ongoing clashes eventually produced a new genetic fabric of nascent nations, all of which shared a barbarian-Byzantine heritage that transcended the ethnic and state borders of the Balkan Peninsula and the lands beyond it.

NOTES

1. Today, archeologists and historians trace these vanished settlements by the cemeteries they left behind. Needless to say it is a confusing task to separate invaders from aboriginals. In the future DNA testing may solve many demographic mysteries. It could potentially affect what we presently take to be the history of this region.

2. Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 309.

3. Procopius, *History of the Wars: Secret History and Buildings*, ed. H. R. Trever-Roper (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 327.

4. John V. A. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 31.

5. So did Robert L. Wolff when he wrote about “the Hunic tribes of the Bulgars” being assimilated by the Slavs. Jonathan Shepard, ed., *The Expansion of Orthodox Europe: Byzantium, the Balkans and Russia* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 168.

6. It is believed that Bulgars raided Macedonia and Thracia in 517, but this may have been done by the Gepids, Ostrogoths, or even the Huns or other tribes; in any case, the Slavs were in full rampage in the Byzantine lands.

7. Procopius, *History*, 301.

8. Robert L. Wolff, “The Second Bulgarian Empire’: Its Origin and History to 1204,” in *The Expansion of Latin Europe, 1000–1500*, ed. Jonathan Shepard, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 267.

9. Wolff, “*The Second Bulgarian Empire*,” 267.

10. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 230.

11. Anna Comnena referred to their main weapon as sickle/scythe also used to reap the harvest (this fact caused them to be confused with the tribes of Scyths). It is a weapon that strikingly resembles the Dacian curved scimitar, a coincidence that puts the Cumans and Dacians together as a common enemy of the Byzantines.

12. The real story is that Hungarians captured an enemy who turned out to be a Cuman warrior who himself had previously been captured by the invading Tartars and forced into their ranks. Claiming treason, King Bela ordered his soldiers to massacre the Cuman king and his court who were seeking refuge in Hungary. The outraged and humiliated Cumans moved out of Hungary, leaving a trail of destruction behind them. The departure of its only ally further weakened the Hungarian armed resistance against the Golden Horde at a time when it had already reached the city of Pest on the Danube. The Tartars faked a retreat and then ambushed the Hungarian army and utterly destroyed it. King Bela “heroically” escaped the slaughter with a small band of men, while the only heroic deed left for the decimated Hungarians was to try break the ice bridge of the Danube so that the Tartars could not cross into their capital. What saved the Hungarians and their country from being wiped off the face of earth was the death of the Mongol emperor. This prompted Batu Khan to lead his Tartars back to Asia in the hope of seizing the vacant throne. Before leaving, he ordered the execution of all captured Hungarians who would otherwise slow the speed of the Golden Horde. As for Bela IV, he returned humiliated and penniless to Hungary.

13. Indeed, early Romanian historical records referred to the Polish people as the Leși/Leshi, a name they obvious knew and related to. As for the Sarmatian blood infused into the Polish nation, it became later a major issue for the Poles who tried to copy the Sarmatian look, from wearing similar clothing to sporting the famous drooping moustache. Their aim was to disassociate themselves from the Slavs of the Ukraine and Russia.

14. Emil Lengyel, *1,000 Years of Hungary* (New York: John Day, 1958), 21.

Chapter Three

From Tribes to States

Empires colonized barbarian lands until the early Middle Ages when a reversal took place—barbarians began to colonize empires, specifically the Byzantine Empire. The barbarians had no concept of country or nationality when they first reached Europe. The most they had achieved by way of social organization was to be part of a clan or a tribe with a common language and religion, similar habits, and common enemies. They had no respect for written documents or treaties, including those made among themselves. They fought against each other over anything, including the plunder obtained through victory. At first, they viewed occupied land as a disposable possession since most of it was the vast, empty, and dusty puszta of the Eastern European wilderness. However, after they entered the Roman Empire, they quickly realized the value of the alien land they had seized, and their deadly raids of plunder and pillage became a full-time occupation. They had to fight and conquer in order to have access to food and supplies because they had no other source to sustain themselves and their families. Their migration was not aimed at working occupied land or rebuilding ruined settlements; rather, they sought to bring back to their encampments as much loot as possible and to extort long-term tributes from the natives.

Since the time of the earlier massive invasion of the Goths and Huns, any barbarian presence in the Balkan Peninsula was regarded as alien to the Byzantine world and therefore equivalent to a human plague; the word “barbarian” was used to describe someone who was violent. Nothing good could be expected from them, so, by definition, they were the enemy. This belief was reinforced when new hordes approached the populated and prosperous Danubian lands, looting them and dragging captives to their encampments in the wilderness. But leaving and returning to home base was exhausting for the warriors and their horses. The raiders began to bring their families with

them, and whole caravans approached the lands they pillaged. Before long, they recognized the expediency of permanently occupying those lands, and, after struggling through famines, they also realized that instead of killing the productive natives, they could make use of them. Slowly but steadily, the primitive barbarians who had never had a homeland became land hungry; at the same time they became aware of a culture they could try to copy in order to improve their lives. Soon, they also came to understand why settlements had been located on commercial routes and why strategic military posts had become fortified towns that attracted skilled laborers within their walls and placed farmers outside them. They observed that villages were built in clusters on large estates anchored by a manor or a castle; and their headmen recognized that this resulted in a functional economy based on a clearly ordered social system with a military chain of command to defend it. Therefore, by the power of example, permanent settlements were established on the assumption that a larger tribe had a better chance of survival—a tribal union offered greater mutual protection and ensured more effective military action. Additionally, the idea of possessing some sort of stronghold led to the idea of chiefdom. The concept of statehood with its tribal borders and an empiric government was in the making.

Any state needs land it calls its own, and in the Balkans this meant Byzantine soil that was already occupied by ancient natives like the Greeks, Ilyrians, Macedonians, Vlachs, and others who were all subjects of Constantinople. At first, the barbarian nomads were seen as temporary settlers who could also be hired to fight off other incoming tribes. With that idea in mind, Emperor Michael II used the Bulgar Khan Omurtag to crush a Slav revolt in 823; in exchange the barbarian leader was allowed to stamp his own coin with the Byzantine seal. But as typically happened when benevolent emperors granted favors to the barbarians, the outcome was not the civilized response that was expected; they tried in vain to make the barbarian settlers obey imperial decrees and pay taxes. Simply put, the barbarians had no concept of law and order. The fact that one Slavic tribe agreed to respect a signed treaty meant nothing to the rest of the nomadic tribes who acted independently and spitefully with regard to any pact; nor did the treaty mean much to the tribe that had signed it.

Still, the Roman legacy and the dynastic Byzantine social order kept the empire militarily strong and economically solid. This garnered the respect of the barbarian leaders who came to seek the same status and prestige among their tribesmen. Above all else, the pagan chieftains, who were also the chief priests, often wanted their people to be baptized because a Christianized mob was easier to control and more likely to establish permanent roots in the Balkans. The new religion was an enormous stabilizing force in the lives of

the converted barbarians. It was necessary in order that they be perceived as legitimate and given a spot on the map—in contrast to their merely looming threateningly on the European horizon in dusty and hungry hordes. A distorted sense of civility and honor developed among those of the new settlers who decided to take over the homeland of others and set down roots. They had many capable leaders, but it was only when the royal throne and crown were handed to them by the Byzantine emperors that they became legal heads of an official state. This fact alone allowed the ungoverned barbarians to finally establish a place for themselves, often on land claimed by more than one tribe or group of people; stable communities led to a growing power that also fertilized seeds of violence among the greedy owners.

The Gepids and Avars never took this crucial step despite their success in occupying land in Dacia and Pannonia during the sixth century and establishing their own rudimentary kingdom. Their Gepidia came to an abrupt end with the invasion of the Avars and Lombards in 567. The mighty Avars then extended their holdings from the Volga region to Pannonia. Because they were strong and much feared in the beginning by the Byzantine emperors, who paid them a heavy subsidy to stay away, the Avars proved to be savagely vengeful when their terms were not met. After their failed attack on Constantinople in 599, they took more than twelve thousand Byzantine captives and butchered them when Emperor Maurice refused to pay a ransom for them. However, infighting among the Avar chieftains and numerous military collisions with the German Franks brought the Avar Empire to an end in 796. To avoid total annihilation they simply fled their heavily fortified capital, and the once mighty Avaria vanished forever from the map of Europe.

The Slavs met with a different fate when it came to building a state that would endure over time. Their initial mission was to reduce Roman landmarks to heaps of ruins. However, because it was in the Slavic character to be beholden to authority, the Slavs were easily exploited by the Avars, who forced them to cooperate on their devastating incursions into various areas within the Byzantine Empire. The result was that countless tribes of Slavs were abandoned on the pastoral lands of Dacian Moesia, Macedonia, Thracia, and other imperial provinces. Their societies were tribal democracies with no classes and ranks. Captured prisoners were not enslaved, but sold for ransom and eventually freed to work on and enlarge the Slavic settlements. In time, their chieftains and war heroes emerged as the tribal elite; they retained the habits they had when living on the steppes, but now they aspired to be rulers of lands newly acquired from people who possessed a superior culture. Exhausted from their centuries of wandering, the Slavs continued to search for a place of their own. There is relatively little documentation of this, but one source from this period, Isadore of Seville, states that “in the fifth year of Heraclius (i.e., 615)

the Slavs took Greece from the Romans...the Slavs occupy all Epirus, most of all of Hellas, the Peloponnesus, and Macedonia...The *Chronicle of Monemvasia* dates the Slavic settlement of the Peloponnesus from 587..."¹ Because of all these regional takeovers, the Slavs established their own territory about which "Patriarch Nicholas III of Constantinople, writing in the late eleventh century, also states that, for 218 years (from 589 to 807) there were no Byzantine officials in the Peloponnesus."² One might wonder if those who occupied these Greek lands were the Vlachs who did indeed populate those areas and still do, but were erroneously termed Bulgars and Slavs.³

All these demographic shifts happened because the Bulgars/Bulgarians were forced out of Great Bulgaria above the Sea of Azov by other migrant barbarians and settled for a while in southern Bessarabia (today's Republic of Moldova). Pressed still farther by Avars and Slavs, they ended up south of the Danube, where they formed another tribal league in the year 632. The main area in which these proto-Bulgarian tribes were concentrated covered a huge loosely defined territory between the Volga and the Dniester rivers. Yet another Bulgar state with its main territory in former Dacian Moesia was created when related tribes were led in battle by Asperuch/Aspruch (r. 680–702) to dominate lands from the Dnieper River to south of the Danube Delta. The Bulgars delivered such devastating attacks on Byzantium that Constantinople was forced to recognize this Slavic state in 680. It was initially, and pompously, called the First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018), and was held together militarily by the Slavic language, a tongue that became common to both the Bulgars and the Slavs.

The Bulgars conquered Serdica/Sofia in 809, but established their capital at Pliska. It was almost destroyed by the Byzantines in 811, but it was subsequently revived and enlarged as a fortified city by Khan/Prince Krum (r. 803–814). This savage ruler, who drank from the skull of Emperor Nicephorus whom he killed in battle, also proved to be also something of a visionary in so far as he issued strict laws to protect the poor and to punish any form of debauchery among his subjects. His firm grip on Bulgarian society and the Bulgarian military helped him double the size of his empire by extending it north of the coast of the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea. Khan Boris I (r. 852–889) was, however, the real founder of the Bulgarian state. After receiving baptism he changed his title and name to Knyaz/Czar (Caesar) Michael. He then converted his mixed-race nation from paganism to Christianity. With the new Cyrillic alphabet, which could accommodate Slavic sounds, Bulgaria became a permanent reality. These Bulgarians were different from those who lived in the Volga Bulgar emirate with its capital at Bolgar; the latter adopted Islam and were decimated by the Golden Horde in 1238.

The Serbs/Serbians underwent the same process of Slavicization as did the Bulgarians, but their society was more advanced. It was led by *zupans*/leaders, who were united for the first time in 825 by a warlord named Vlastimir. He acted as their common ruler and founded the Serbian confederation of Rascia (Northern Montenegro), Trebounia (eastern Herzegovina), and Konvali (southeast of Croatia), thus establishing his own dynasty and creating a tribal homeland for his people. His oldest son, Mutimir, succeeded him and consolidated this imperial Serb state; its level of culture was elevated when Christianity was adopted there. The absorption of the Bulgar Empire into the Byzantine Empire in 1018 and its subsequent dissolution were followed by the meteoric rise and rule of Stefan Nemanja (r. 1168–1196). He used Orthodox Christianity to extend his empire between what is now southern Serbia and Montenegro/Zeta, eastern Bosnia, and Herzegovina/Pagania, as far as the southern coast of Croatia. This ruthless and opportunistic Grand Prince then declared his state independent of Constantinople and founded his own dynasty, a historic act that kept the Serbian state alive. It was followed by the Serbian Empire of Stefan Dusan (r. 1346–1355), one of the largest states of Europe at that time and one that reflected the giant size of its emperor, literally the tallest man of his era. The legacy of this empire was, however, one of vast ethnic unrest. The nations that once belonged to the Serbian Empire, unhappily situated between Bulgars, Byzantines, and Hungarians, would find themselves at war with each other in the future.

The Croats were greatly affected by the unstoppable barbarian invasions into their area of the Balkans. In the seventh century, they were located between the south of Poland and Bavaria in their own Chrobatia (White Croatia). The Czech invasion resulted in a parallel Croatian state that covered those areas which today make up Bosnia, Croatia, Dalmatia, Serbia, and Slovenia regions. The Croats proved to be constructive occupiers who created a well ordered society and had a clear concept of how to administer their *zupe*/counties on the beautiful Dalmatian coast. There they established their own state with its capital in Biograd (White City). Their economic and social laws were enforced upon any and all new arrivals, and the Croats proved disciplined and industrious. They possessed advanced farming techniques, metal working skills, and elaborate systems of commerce. Their military power was impressive: King Tomislav (r. 910–928) succeeded in building an army of 160,000 foot soldiers and cavalrymen and a fleet of 180 ships. In 926, he successfully defeated Czar Simeon who was forced to retreat with his invading Bulgarian army. Even the Venetian ships dutifully paid taxes to the new state when they traveled along the Croatian coast. At this point in time, Croatia ruled Bosnia, costal Montenegro, Pannonia, and half of the eastern islands of the Adriatic; these were rarely raided by the barbarians. Since they were formally under the authority of Constantinople,

the Croats promptly established better political and religious connections with Western Europe rather than with the Byzantine Empire. In return, Pope John VIII in 879 recognized the suzerainty of Prince Branimir over the Croats, and the Croat state gained its legitimacy vis-à-vis the European states. Pope Alexander III honored them with a visit in 1177, and the people of Zadar greeted him with songs in the Croat language. It was described by the Italian chronicler Baronius as *eorum Sclavica lingua*, a form of slang that became very popular in Constantinople.

From 1102 onward, the Croats and Hungarians shared a newly built state under common Hungarian and Croatian Kings. The kings were crowned twice—once with the Hungarian crown and once with the Croatian crown, thereby confirming their independence from the Byzantine Empire. The Hungarian menace threatened Bosnia and Hum/Herzegovina, but the Kotromanic dynasty succeeded through military engagements and diplomatic marriages in gaining its independence from the Bosnians in 1353. Given that they were partially Catholic and partially Orthodox, the populations of this two-part empire would undergo dramatic changes after the Turkish occupation in 1463.

Other Western Slavs were united by various supreme chieftains and their lands covered what are today Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. After 658 most of these tribes of Wends were scattered by the Avars, but the Slovenes remained in their safe corner of Carniola, northeast of Venice. The principality of Carantia/Karantanija eventually emerged from this land, and in 771 it was included in the Frankish Empire. The Czechs and Slovaks were pushed north by the Magyar invasion of Pannonia and formed the principality of Nitrava/Nitra and, later, that of Carniola/Krajina, which sheltered the two major tribes. After 830 all of these incipient states were included in the Great Moravian Empire of Prince Mojmir. It would be reduced to ashes by the Magyars in 907. Part of that empire was Bohemia with its unenviable geography; its Czechs were squeezed between Germans, Hungarians, Poles, and other Slavs. The Czechs and Slovaks survived by accepting German protection. In the late tenth century they developed their own state under Boleslav II (r. 967–999); over time it was subjected to many tragedies and demographic shifts until it evolved into today's Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The Cumans persisted by creating their own Terter dynasty (1280–1322); their two czars, who extended the borders of Bulgaria, were heavily involved in Byzantine affairs. The resourceful Cumans settled in Wallachia and Moldavia (part of former Dacia), where they founded their second Cumania, a strong military base that was instrumental in creating the Second Bulgarian Empire (1187–1280), referred to by Pope Gregory IX as *Blachorum et Bulgarorum* (of the Vlachs and Bulgars). It was led by the Vlach dynasty of the Asans. When this dynasty collapsed, Bulgaria became subject to the

Byzantines, Serbs, and Mongols. However, north of the Danube, the main land of Wallachia, like its sister province of Moldavia, was a principality that suffered little political interference from the Cumans; instead it acted as their protector. The Cumans also founded the Basarab dynasty (1310–1529) in Wallachia. It retained its independence after the Romanians defeated the invading Hungarian army at Posada in 1330. Some fifteen years later, Moldavia, under Bogdan I, also regained its freedom from the Crown of Hungary. Transylvania, the cradle of the Daco-Roman civilization, shared the Cuman's protection against the Magyar intrusions into the Carpathians. The legacy of Cumans as state-makers vanished, however, as they were without a state of their own.⁴ The invasion of the Golden Horde in 1241 undid the power of the Cumans, but this attack paled in comparison to the apocalyptic onslaught of the Hungarians who were, in fact, in no position to impose their will on Transylvania.

After the Mongolian tsunami, Hungary's new king was Kun Laszlo/Ladislav IV (r. 1272–1290); his name, Kun, identified him as a Cuman on his mother's side. He lived like a Cuman with his Cuman entourage in the city of Buda, fleeing from there to Transylvania when any threat presented itself. Because of him, the Cumans felt at home in Hungary where they lived in the regions of Greater and Lesser Cumania; many Hungarians reciprocated the welcome by relocating to Transylvania. As in previous centuries, Transylvania's rich gold and silver mines proved to be an irresistible magnet for migrants from a poor country. The Catholic Church included Hungary in the Diocese of Cumania with its seat at Milcov in Wallachia, thus demonstrating the Vatican's eagerness to convert the pagan Cumans and eventually also the Orthodox Romanians.

The Poles/Polish people were among the groups making up the Slavonic confederation which had settled north of the Vistula River, where the tribes of Polans/Polonians (people of the plains) assumed a leadership role and became the founders of the Polish voivodeships/principalities. Vistulans forced into the Polan tribes had laid the foundation for Polonia/Poland by the end of the tenth century. Unlike in other states led by chieftains turned monarchs, a certain witty and strong-willed peasant named Piast established a dynasty that would last until 1370. Piast (r. 960–992) was a capable ruler who understood that survival was possible through an alliance with the Holy Roman Empire. In 966, Mieszko I was baptized and subsequently began imposing Catholicism on his Lekhitic nation. He continued to extend his territory by the power of the sword and diplomacy, annexing important lands around the Vistula delta. His state expanded to a size equivalent to present day Poland. His equally capable son, Boleslaw I the Great (r. 992–1025), continued his father's legacy, making this kingdom one of the largest and most powerful in

Europe. However, in the year 1000 at the court of King Otto III, the settlements led by Duke Boleslaw were said to encompass all of the existing Polish tribes, destined to belong to the future larger state of Sclavinia. Additionally, there was the state of Polabia in the midlands of the Elbe River founded by the Polabian tribes, a branch of the Western Slavs. Boleslaw I the Great united all of these groups into a most powerful kingdom whose different tribal areas were “Germanicized” after the twelfth century.

The Baltic people who would become the Lithuanians were united in 1236 into one state that would become the Kingdom of Lithuania under Mindaugas (r. 1253–1263). The only king his pagan nation would ever have, he fiercely defended the freedom of his nation until he was assassinated. His three successors were killed as well, and the Slavic population came to be divided between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Other nations had little influence on the history of the Balkans, specifically, Belarus (formerly White Rus founded by the Slavic tribes) and Estonia. The Estonians were not Balts like the Latvians, Lithuanians, and Prussians; they were more closely related to the Finns. They had lived on the same land since time immemorial, making them one of the most ancient and longest surviving peoples in Europe.

Almost every migratory wave from Asia passed through the vast steppes of what is today the south of Russia, making it impossible for any state to establish firm borders there. There was therefore no Ukrainian state in the year 882 when Rus Prince Olaf/Oleg came from Novgorod and took control of many of the docile Slavic tribes there; they were to become his tributary vassals. He used their military power to wrest the city of Kiev from his fellow Scandinavians. As prince of Kiev (r. 882–912), he was instrumental in establishing the Kievan Rus state together with his proto-Russian subjects. He used their fighting power to force Constantinople to negotiate with him. By doing so, he coerced Emperor Leo V to recognize his Slavic kingdom as an equal commercial partner, putting his state on the map of Eastern Europe. Prince Ingvar/Igor (r. 912–945), also a Varangian, continued the work of consolidating the state by allying himself with the Pechenegs and then conducting further attacks on Constantinople in 941 and 944. He died trying to collect tribute from the Drevlian tribes included in his confederation. His widow Princess Olha/Helga/Olga (r. 945–962) took over his reign; she became famous for slaughtering or burning alive five thousand Drevlians to avenge her husband’s death, as well as for baptizing herself in the Orthodox faith. Olga was the first Rus to be sanctified; her name becoming synonymous with “Holy.”

With the baptism of Vladimir the Great (r. 980–1015), who married Ann of Constantinople, Christianity was imposed upon the Slavs. He united them under the sign of the cross and was also responsible for extending his principdom

to the shores of the Baltic Sea. But the next ruler, Prince Yaroslav the Wise (r. 1016–1054), would elevate his state to a historic highpoint. He was wise in his marriages and those of his children and so was able to ally himself with the powerful Poles and Scandinavians; he even murdered his siblings to retain absolute power. He brought great glory to his state when his army defeated the Pechenegs in 1036; in 1043 he raided the Byzantine Empire as far as the Walls of Constantinople. The ever opportunistic Yaroslav ensured peace by marrying his son to the daughter of Emperor Constantine; this provided a reason to remove the Crimean Chersonese from Byzantine control. Upon his death, however, the Kievan state became divided once again. Control over many of its principalities was loosened so that it gradually disintegrated; additional barbarian invasions accelerated this process. The Ukrainian lands and population were then placed under the protection of Lithuania and later of Poland.

The Russians were under Oleg of Novgorod (r. 882–912), who was able to increase his military power by seizing control of the numerous Slavic chiefdoms which surrounded it. The principality that arose was the precursor of the Russian state; it copied the pattern of the Kievan administration and so was able to rule most of the eastern Slavs, who were later referred to as Russians. Novgorod (meaning “Big New City”) was, in the ninth century, their main economic and political city. In the mid-twelfth century, a new major city, Moscow, was built; its name was mentioned for the first time in 1147. After its wooden structures were burned to the ground by the Mongol invaders in 1238, it was rebuilt in stone with the Kremlin as its innermost fortress. This city would become the capital of the Muscovite state. It was saved from the invasion of the Golden Horde by Alexander Nevsky (1220–1263) who also defeated German and Swedish armies and was therefore in a good position to negotiate with the Mongol leaders. In 1240, the Golden Horde burned Kiev to the ground and thus put an end to the kingdom of the Kievan Rus.

In the north, a no man’s land, the Grand Duchy of Moscow began to subordinate the Russian settlements that were rapidly growing in number and becoming rivals to each other; at the same time, he paid tribute to the Tartars as stronger protectors, a sort of benign foreign power. In 1328 Ivan I, Grand Duke of Russia, made Moscow his capital, thus establishing an authentic Russian state. The Russian rulers continually had designs on Ukraine, but the Lithuanians, who dominated the entire eastern corridor from the Baltic to the Black Seas, including today’s Belarus, prevented this. Ukraine never wanted to be part of Russia. Even though the two states shared the same heritage, basic language, and religion, they grew apart. Unlike in the rest of the Eastern Europe where borders were more or less defined between neighboring states, the lines of demarcation between these two states were arbitrary—a condition that would lead to many conflicts in the future.

The Magyar and Hungarian tribes arrived later in Europe, and their improvised state was not founded until Prince Arpad (r. 895–907), their first dynastic ruler, settled them in the Tisza Valley. This principedom served mostly as a collection of military tent camps for the Magyar hordes that continually carried out their pillaging forays in and beyond the neighboring countries and attacked Constantinople in 934. Most of these missions ended in crushing defeats of the Magyars. Thus in 995, King Otto I destroyed their devastating power and forced the “modern Huns” to permanently settle in the Pannonia grasslands called *Pascua Romanorum*. Prince Geza of Hungary (r. 972–997) had the distinction of being baptized by a Benedictine monk—a fact which changed the course of history for his people. Even though he continued to worship pagan gods, the Magyars were exposed to Catholicism. The pope conferred the royal crown on Geza’s son, Istvan/Stephen I (r. 1001–1038) on Christmas day in 1000, making him the first Hungarian king with a mission to convert the country’s pagan nomads into Christians. This historical event gave the aimless Magyars a state, albeit one that was awkwardly located between the East and West. They declared themselves westernized even as they continued their ferocious invasions of foreign lands in search of booty: “They were the modern Huns and the forerunners of the Tatars and Turks. In the face of this danger the Western world fell on its knees: ‘From the Magyars’ wrath deliver us, oh God!’”⁵

In 1241, however, the situation became reversed for the Hungarians when the Golden Horde was approaching their borders from three directions simultaneously. Like Attila’s Huns (from whom Hungarians proudly claim to be descended), the Golden Horde transformed the young country into a wasteland, annihilating its fighting men and taking away its women and children. King Bela IV himself became a fugitive like most of the Hungarians who survived the apocalyptic event.⁶ What saved the Hungarians and their country from being wiped off the face of earth was the death of the Mongol emperor. This prompted Batu Khan to lead his Tartars back to Asia with the hope of seizing the vacant throne. Before leaving, he ordered the execution of all of the captured Hungarians since their being allowed to remain alive would slow the progress of the Golden Horde back to Asia. As for Bela IV, he returned humiliated and penniless to Hungary where he then welcomed Cumans, Kipchaks, Patzinaks, Pechenegs, Slavs, and other barbarians to settle and rebuild his ruined country. Thus a new nation was born. It was an amalgam of many ethnic groups and, in turn, gave birth to a “Second Hungary.” King Bela IV (r. 1235–1270) is fondly remembered by the Hungarians as “the Second Founder of our Country;” he is also credited with the creation of the modern Hungarian state.

A common misconception is that young Bela IV, who was sent by his father in 1226 to the Carpathians to convert Cuman chieftains to Christianity,

brought about the Hungarian colonization of Transylvania. The mere fact that a few Cuman leaders acknowledged his overlordship did not mean that he ran a Hungarian government in Transylvania. Even though he later called himself King of Cumania, this was more like an allegory since he never fulfilled that role. Bela's grandson Ladislas IV was anything but Hungarian: his mother was a Cuman princess, he and his court of Cumans wore Cuman clothes, his mistresses were Cumans, and he alienated the Hungarian nobility who asked the pope to replace him. All the pope could do, however, was to excommunicate the king who did not actually care about Catholicism and had taken refuge in Transylvania. Eventually, he returned to the throne. A civil war followed in Hungary, during which Ladislas looked again for shelter among the Cumans—until he was assassinated in their camp. The next Hungarian king, Andrew III (r. 1290–1301), was born and educated in Venice. Even though he wore the Holy Crown, the Hungarian nobility (who had previously arrested him) questioned his legitimacy, declaring his father to have been a bastard and calling him “the Italian.” He retained his throne after being endorsed by the friendly Transylvanians who would do anything to spite the Hungarians. To the end of his reign, Andrew battled the Hungarian aristocracy with greater ferocity than he did his external enemies.

For the remainder of their history, the Hungarians' affairs epitomized the process of Balkanization as they tried to subjugate Eastern nations while at the same time themselves being either included in or excluded from various empires. These regimes alternately dismembered or gifted Hungary with portions of land, thereby creating a sort of ultimate ethnic and political nightmare. “How to win by losing” seemed to be the Hungarians' national slogan; they obeyed foreign kings, including King Matthias, born in Transylvania of a Romanian father. Matthias (r. 1458–1490) brought the Hungarian culture to its Golden Age, only to have it tarnished by Ottoman occupation after his death. Still, even if the domain of the Hungarian Crown extended east of the Tisza River, Transylvania was not part of Hungary. Moreover, it was not Transylvania, but most of Hungary, that the Turks occupied for more than 170 years. Fortunately for the Hungarians, the Austrian and German domination of the country polished the nation, providing them with a pattern for orderly and modern living.

The Turkish state in the Balkans was also a late addition to the map of the peninsula, and its foundation was the result of a long and twisted chain of historic events. The major portion of the Ottoman Empire lay in Anatolia and Asia, but Turkish military involvement in Byzantine affairs led to the capture of Adrianople in 1361 and Thessaloniki in 1387, followed by the occupation of Bulgaria in 1396. The rapid expansion of the Ottomans into the rest of the Balkans precipitated the inevitable siege and capture of Constantinople in

1453, thus marking the end of the Byzantine Empire. In a matter of days, Hagia Sophia (Church of the Holy Wisdom) became a mosque, an unmistakable sign of a new era and the rise of an Islamic state in Europe. It was the Turks who changed the name of the Haemus Mountains into “Balkan,” meaning a chain of wooded mountains. This then came to be adopted as the modern name for the entire peninsula that belonged to them for hundreds of years.

By the end of the fifteen century, Eastern Europe was a land in which tribal confederations had developed into small autonomous states with their own capitals and kings. These sovereigns ruled within well-defined borders but had designs on larger territories. Most importantly, the same spoken language and the same religion and cultural values would define the future of these nations and states. However, all the incipient states gained legitimacy only after they adopted Christianity and a pope or an emperor crowned their princes and kings. (The sultans were an obvious exception to this rule.) Still, even with the massive geo-demographic shifts, ancient nations continued to exist in Eastern Europe. Albanians, Greeks, and Romanians have the historical distinction of *not* having been being assimilated by the Slavs; the latter two would also never convert to Islam.

The Albanians inhabited the land of Illyrians, the oldest inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula who settled in the middle of the Dalmatian coast. They spoke their own language—one that bore no relation to any other world language. This is an indication that their tribes were of a different genetic makeup than the rest of Europeans. Somehow, Albania suffered fewer traumatic invasions from the barbarians than did the rest of the Balkans. Regardless of who occupied or divided the Albanoi, they persisted in speaking their own language (*Lingua Albanesca*). Some of them, Arvanites, migrated to Greece where they became a prosperous and powerful ethnicity. Most of the Byzantine province of Illyria was Slavicized, a process that led to the creation of many Slavic states that have lasted until modern times. Control of Albania was disputed mainly between the Byzantine Empire and Serbia until the former collapsed. The Ottomans would have to confront the ferocious military opposition of the Albanians before they were able to occupy that country in 1479.

The Eastern Empire was inhabited by both numerous homogeneous peoples (Dacians, Macedonians, Illyrians, Thracians, etc.) and also incoming ethnic groups, such as Avars, Bulgars, Serbs, other Slavs, etc. The latter dwarfed the Greek minority. However, the Greeks seemed to be unaffected by the ravages of time and proudly retained their national identity and original territory, becoming neither Romanized nor Slavicized. Foreign settlers, such as the Slavs in the Peloponnesus and later in the Turkish settlements, did not affect the Greek way of life and thinking. The Byzantine *basileis*/emperors belonged to

different ethnicities, but they bore Greek names and they needed the support of the Greeks.⁷ And, beginning in the seventh century, Latin was replaced by Greek as the official language of the empire.

To deal with the constant demographic flux in the Balkans, the emperors of Constantinople applied an important lesson learned from the previous emperors of Rome: trust no barbarian group with important matters of state and allow no German generals to lead the armies of the empire. To ensure its political unity and survival, the empire had, since Constantine the Great, robustly identified itself with one God and one religion—Orthodoxy. Greek influence was visible in every aspect of life and at all levels of society, dominating all of Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, when Greek independence ended with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a significant impact was felt by all of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Macedonians could trace their origins back to the thirteenth century B.C., when they were put on the map by Alexander the Great. But following the Roman occupation of 160 B.C., Macedonian national power declined; subsequent numerous invasions of Bulgars, Slavs, and other barbarians brought in foreign settlers who changed the ethnic mix of the nation. At the end of the tenth century, Macedonia became part of the First Bulgarian Empire and later was renamed a *thema*, or province, of Bulgaria under the administration of Constantinople. In fact, Macedonia was shown on the Byzantine map as being located between Bulgaria on the west, Paristrion/Moesia on the north, Thracia on the east, and Strymon on the south (above the Aegean Sea). For practical purposes, it was re-situated away from its original location. Byzantine Macedonia, now with its capital at Hadrianopolis (Edirne), was formed at the expense of Thracia, another defunct ancient state. Over two centuries (867–1056), the Macedonian emperors led Byzantium to the zenith of its power. During medieval times, it was a Balkan region inhabited by ethnic Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Jews, Serbs, Turks, Vlachs, and others. The Ottoman conquest caused the name of Macedonia to disappear from the map, but the Macedonians survived even as their land was divided among other nations who imposed different languages on them. To their credit, the proud heirs of Alexander the Great have maintained their ethnic identity to the present day and now have their own free republic.

The Romanians/Vlachs/Wallachians descended from the population of Dacians whose tales of war against the Romans were carved on the magnificent Column of Trajan which stands in the middle of Rome. The Roman occupation of Transylvania, as well of Dacia south of the Danube in Moesia (the former land of Dacia Aureliana, Dacia Mediterranea, and Dacia Ripensis), produced the Proto-Romanian people. They kept their lands as they never migrated.

The arrival of the Slavs overwhelmingly changed the ethnic and linguistic composition of the peoples of the southern Balkans. But it seems that at least one pre-Slav group, who came to be known most commonly as Vlachs, survived the onslaught. With the arrival of the Slavs, they took to the uplands or migrated. Their most important distinguishing feature was their language, which was derived from Latin and, as is evident from the small groups that still survive today, is closely related to Romanian.⁸

By the ninth century they had mastered a distinct language rooted in Latin, which Romanians still speak today. They were referred to by the Byzantines as Vlachoï, Vlachs, and even Blacs, names that came from Greater Wallachia, a Romanian principality that was part of Central Dacia. The other principalities of Banat, Bessarabia, Moldavia, and Transylvania were temporarily occupied at different times by powerful tribes of Avars, Cumans, and Pechenegs. The Vlachs of other areas, such as Dardania, Moesia, and Pannonia, were less connected to the Byzantine Empire because more Slavs and other barbarians invaded their lands. A paragraph written by historian Anna Comnena illustrates the utter confusion that reigned among the Byzantines about who was who in the Carpatho-Danubian lands:

When the Dacians refused to observe any longer the ancient treaty with the Romans and deliberately broke it, the Sarmatians (who used to be called Mysians in the old days) heard of their action and became restive themselves. They were not satisfied to remain in their own territory (separated from the Empire by the Ister) and when a general uprising took place, they crossed the river to our lands. The reason for the migration was the deadly hostility of the Getae, who were neighbors of the Dacians and plundered Sarmatian settlements.⁹

The translator of the book (originally written in Greek) assumed in a footnote that by Dacians, Comnena meant Hungarians and that “Sarmatians are better known as the Patzinaks.” Both assumptions are, however, historically incorrect. Her mistaken identity of the Sarmatians as Mysians is obvious from a geographic point of view: they formerly lived above the Sea of the Azov and eventually trickled into Eastern Dacia. Constantine the Great resettled many Sarmatians in Macedonia and Thracia, but not in Mysia/Moesia. The Mysians she mentions have to have been the Vlachs of Moesia who lived there both before and after Roman and Byzantine occupation. Those who became restive and crossed the Danube during Isaac I’s reign (1057–1059) were not the Caucasian Sarmatians, but most likely the Turkish tribes of Patzinaks and Pechenegs, along with the Magyars of King Andrew I. They could not have been mistaken for Dacians. Comnena was correct, however, in noting “the deadly hostility of the Getae” towards the “Sarmatians.” Getae was another name commonly used for the Dacians who obviously did not want Turkish

settlements on their land. The revolting Geto-Dacians plundered them, forcing the “Sarmatians” to migrate south of the Danube when the river froze, and “dumped themselves down on [Byzantine] territory.”¹⁰

This misunderstanding illustrates how little she knew about the demographics of the populations who lived in the former Dacia. That was not the case with the historian Niketas Choniates, who dedicated tens of pages to an accurate description of the Vlachs and their lands. In many cases the identity of Vlachs and Wallachians shone through the fabric of history:

The Valachs lived not only in the territory of present day Moravia, but also resided throughout the vast regions of the Carpathian mountains. At the closest distance to us, this included the territory of Upper Slovakia, south Tesin and south Poland. History also instructs us that the Valachs, the mountain shepherds, were involved in a special kind of herdsmanship entirely unique in Central Europe and that they originally came from Balcany in what is now Romania.¹¹

The question of the ownership of Transylvania was an even more confusing one and continues to need clarification. Until the end of the thirteenth century, only a small number of Magyars and Hungarians trickled into Transylvania—an area which they later claimed to be their homeland. The *Chronology of Transylvanian History* states that in 896 “as the seven Magyar tribes sweep into the Carpathian Basin, the tribe of the *gyula* (military warlord) and the tribe of the *kende* (titular ruler) occupy the area that will become Transylvania.”¹² In other words, it asserts that Transylvania would not exist if not for the invasion of the Magyar tribes. But, in fact, in 896 the Magyars advancing toward Transylvania were twice defeated by the Bulgars (in the battle of Southern Buh) and the Pecheneg armies, and survivors scrambled for shelter anywhere they could, including in the Carpathian forests that were called *Silva Vlachorum*/Forest of Vlachs.¹³ Defeated, homeless, and starving, the decimated Hungarians were a mere shadow of the previous mighty horde and in no position to occupy any land. When Prince Almos (father of Arpad) tried to enter Transylvania circa 896, he battled the natives in the area that is today Satu Mare (Romania). During an appalling military defeat there, he lost his own life. There is, therefore, no way in the tenth century that the Magyars could have controlled the Mures/Maros Valley and conquered Transylvania. Simply put, defeated invaders from a flat land do not venture into the mountains to fight. In the next three centuries it was militarily impossible for anyone to take Transylvania away from the Pechenegs and Cumans since they were among the tribes most feared by the Hungarians. The Hungarians may have conducted invasions of the Romanian principalities and imposed certain terms on some people there, but they certainly did not occupy the land. From the end of fifteenth century it was

considered part of the Hungarian crown, but Transylvania was never, at any time, “the Third Hungary” in the Carpathians.¹⁴

In conclusion, the uniqueness of this new demography of the Balkans was that in a few centuries all of the conquests and settlements took place at the expense of the indigenous population. They either resettled into the impregnable mountains and forests, as did the Albanians and Wallachians, or they remained where they were, like the Greeks and Vlachs. It was the latter who shared their culture and productive skills with their occupiers, while new settlers imposed their brutal social rules on the natives.

The role of the Byzantine Church cannot be emphasized enough in recounting the history of this period. It considerably elevated the level of cultural and spiritual life of the settled barbarians and generally served to ensure greater civility. By the close of the eleventh century, most of the invaders had been Christianized, and, to maintain peace, Constantinople granted them homelands. It was at this point that the “sacred roots” of many dynasties originated—savage warlords became transformed into mythical heroes and saints.

Both new and ancient nations and states would continue to undergo numerous demographic and territorial changes as leaders made volatile alliances and the winning armies shifted borders repeatedly—a phenomenon that has continued to the present day. Despite the many violent clashes with Constantinople, the countries that were founded, as described in this chapter, have lasted. Most of them feature the *dikefalos/duokephalos* Byzantine eagle on their coats of arms and flags. And, in spite of the countless revolts and wars of rebellion against Ottoman occupation, they share the flavors of Turkish cuisine, literally and figuratively. Along with the deeply rooted political and economic corruption inherited from both empires and the never-ending border disputes that they carry out, Eastern European nations continue to demonstrate that they are rooted in the historic process of Balkanization.

NOTES

1. John V. A. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 62.

2. Fine, *Early Medieval Balkans*, 62.

3. The historian Niketas seems to have misnamed just about every ethnicity that was not Greek. The names of the “Bulgar” local settlements in the south include Bistritsa, Boucovina, Granitsa, etc.—old names with Slavic roots of locations that can today be found in Romania. These settlements can only have been inhabited by the Vlachs. This fact sheds an entirely different light on the process of Slavic “colonization” of the Balkans. It leads to an account that diverges greatly from the

views of modern Bulgarian scholars who play down the roles of the Vlachs and Vlachs.

4. Their memory is preserved in Romania through the popular use of names like Coman, Comana, Comaneci, Comanescu, and possibly cumatru/godfather. Above all else, the strong presence of the Cumans in the Carpathian Basin preserved the domain of the Romanized Dacians in what is today Romania.

5. Emil Lengyel, *1,000 Years of Hungary* (New York: John Day, 1958), 20.

6. The saga of the king's escape from Mongolian captivity reads like a Hollywood script. After exhausting all venues for foreign help, while the Mongols turned cities to ashes and slaughtered their populations, Bela saw the Mongols retreat and felt brave enough to attack them at Mohi where he was lured into a mock victory. While the Hungarians celebrated all night and their king failed to organize a defense of their camp, the Mongols surrounded them and engaged in an onslaught; Bela and his court miraculously escaped. With a Mongolian squadron on his heels, he fled to Pozsony/Bratislava, only to end up in Hainburg where he was sheltered by his friend, Duke Friederick of Austria. The friendship ended when the Duke confiscated the Hungarian treasury Bela had brought with him and also asked for three border counties to be handed over to Austria. Robbed and desperate, the king fled to the safety of Zagreb. But this time he was followed by an entire Mongol army which flattened the city and burned down its new cathedral when it refused to extradite Bela. The king then fled from one city to another until he reached the Adriatic shore. The Tartars, in close pursuit, shot arrows at his boat as it departed to take him to safety in the fortress of Trau/Trogir in Croatia.

7. The English translation of Greek names made their original names irrelevant in modern days. Emperor Constantine was Konstantinos; Justinian I, Petrus Sabbatius; Theodore II, Theodoros Laskaris; and John I, Iōannēs I Tzimiskēs.

8. Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 8.

9. Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin, 1969), 122.

10. Comnena, *Alexiad*, 122.

11. Zdenek Konecny and Frantisek Mainus, *Stopami Minulosti: Kapitool z Dejin Moravy a Slezka/Traces of the Past: Chapters From the History of Moravia and Silesia/* (Brno: Blok, 1979).

12. <http://www.hungarian-history.hu/lib/transy/transy02.htm>, and John F. Cadzow, Andrew Ludanyi, and Louis J. Elteto, eds., *Transylvania: The Roots of Ethnic Conflict* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1983), 11.

13. The community of Vlaha, near Cluj-Napoca, testifies to the Vlah/Vlachian's presence in the heart of Transylvania, and today's archeological findings also show Gepidic settlements there.

14. The British governance of eighteenth century colonial America proved to be only an imperial illusion of grandeur. At present, the Crown of England may include Australia and Canada, but that does not mean that these nations belong to England. Likewise, if the later Austro-Hungarian Empire included Transylvania, that was not what the Romanians wanted and they often rose up against it.

Chapter Four

Volatile Alliances in the Balkan Peninsula

Alliances were never straightforward in the Dark Ages between the sixth and sixteenth century; indeed, they were almost inevitably destined to fail. Keeping a promise was impractical in the face of endless acts of greed, predation, and revenge; an oath taken to alleviate a desperate situation was readily broken as soon as a better opportunity arose. Often alliances were based on distorted beliefs and suspicions about the other party; then the naked reality of betrayal quickly turned friend into foe. Other reasons for violating an alliance included the fear of dying, the desire to save lives in unnecessary fights, pure cowardice, and the obvious futility of maintaining an alliance where the benefits were negligible to one or both of the parties. Whether they were freely entered into or coerced, treaties could be made among barbarian tribes, between barbarians and Byzantines, and sometimes between a Western power and an Eastern European ally. Alliances were forged instantly between barbarians when the parties faced a common enemy, and they were broken just as quickly when it came to sharing the plunder or partitioning the occupied land. Playing enemies off against each other, and dividing and conquering them by entering into unexpected alliances were the Byzantine way of maintaining territorial dominance. But this strategy backfired in many unexpected ways.

There were so many invasions into the Byzantine Empire that its ambassadors and negotiators found it necessary to establish a rule for co-existence among the barbarians who were flooding into the imperial provinces. Their efforts were in vain. Constantinople relied on either military force or bribery to maintain peace with the invaders and tried to build alliances with them. This had little historical impact since the barbarians who had now settled there had no notion of moral integrity and no respect for written agreements. And, they had no compunction about committing treason once an alliance

had served its purpose, or if they sensed the slightest suspicion of wrongdoing or some sort of personal offense. Their decisions to either join or break an alliance were made in a flash, the critical factor being whether an ally was victorious in a battle or war, or just about to lose in one. In the words of historian Anna Comnena, "The truth is, all barbarians are usually fickle and characteristically unable to keep their pledges."¹

Royal marriages sealed alliances among countries and nations and thereby created friendly or adversarial relationships. Some pagan leaders became Christianized through the influence of their wives, a fact that gained them the support of Western European powers, but in most cases included them in the Eastern Orthodox nations. The Polish King Mieszko married a German noblewoman; King Geza of Hungary had first a German and then a Byzantine wife, and his son Stephen I became the brother-in-law of Emperor Henry II because of his Bavarian wife; King Bela III's two marriages created a bridge between the Hungarian nation and Western Europe, while Stephen V of Hungary married a Cuman princess. The second marriage of John Asen II of Bulgaria made him the son-in-law of the Hungarian King Andras II, and by his third marriage he became the son-in-law of Byzantine Emperor Theodore I. His alliance with Byzantium was further ensured when Asen's daughter married the son of Emperor John III. In an effort to keep his throne and establish a Byzantine-Serbian dynastic union, King Milutin married the six year-old daughter of Emperor Andronicus II. One of Murad II's seven wives was Mara/Maria Hatun of Serbia, who proved to be an excellent negotiator between her father, Despot Brankovich, and her sultan husband. Moreover, she was hugely instrumental in convincing her stepson Mehmed II, the Conqueror of Constantinople, to save Greek Orthodoxy, and implicitly the Orthodox Church in the entire Balkans, from Ottoman annihilation. The marriage of Polish Queen Jadwiga to Lithuanian Duke Wladyslaw II cemented the union of these two countries and laid the foundation for the Jagiello dynasty that later ruled Poland, Lithuania, and Hungary.

The first major barbarian coalition was between the Avars and various tribes of Slavs. Since the Avars were better organized both militarily and socially, they quickly took control of the aimless Slavs, a loosely connected group of tribes with no concept of alliance. At the end of the sixth century, the Slavs were still trying unsuccessfully to settle in the Balkan Peninsula, whereas the Avars had already established themselves in parts of former Dacia and Pannonia. Together they invaded the Byzantine Empire only to plunder or extort ransom or tribute from it, and then return to their camps. While the Avars were militarily efficient, they were not numerous and so had to depend on the many Slavic tribes already present in the territories to be raided. Switching sides was a talent for the witty Avars. They continually

played the Byzantines off against the Slavs, and joined only the side that proved victorious. Often, the Slavs were merely waiting for someone to direct them so together they could collect a tribute from the Byzantines, and in such cases, Avars never failed to be their ally.

But, Constantinople didn't always co-operate in this scheme. After the death of Emperor Justinian, Justin II (r. 565–578) refused to pay a yearly subsidiary to the Avars and Slavs. To avenge this insult, the barbarian coalition plundered the defiant empire, forcing the next emperor, Tiberius II (r. 578–582) to pay the Avars sixty thousand silver coins in order to keep the peace. Likewise, when in 599 Emperor Maurice refused to be blackmailed, the Avars slaughtered twelve thousand Byzantine prisoners. In 626 tribute was once again withdrawn. This time the Avars put together a military coalition of eighty thousand Gepids, Bulgars, and Slavs and attacked Constantinople. They staged a seven-mile wide siege that cut off the city from the rest of the peninsula—until their primitive fleet was destroyed by the Byzantine navy. The barbarian coalition was supported by the Persian army which attacked Constantinople at the same time from the Asian side. It was defeated as well. The unhappy Avars and Slavs ended up fighting each other, while the Bulgarians liberated themselves from Avar control and the Croatians established their own state in Dalmatia.

Improbable alliances were also made by Justinian II, who was dethroned in 695 and exiled to Crimea, after which he fled to Khazaria and married the khan's sister. When Constantinople demanded his extradition, Justinian took shelter among people who had previously been his sworn enemies—the Bulgarians. He struck up a friendship with their leader, Tervel, who then promptly led an army to conquer Constantinople. During this unsuccessful siege of the city, Justinian sneaked inside the capital and reclaimed his throne. He then bestowed honors on Tervel such as had never before been given to any pagan chief, including the title of caesar/czar. Ironically, the emperor flattered Tervel into submission but ended up having to pay him a tribute to keep the Bulgarians in place. He subsequently sent an army to the Crimea to push the Khazars out.

Former allies had become mortal enemies: Justinian was assassinated as a result of the Khazars' plot to punish the man who married their princess and denied her the right to rule the Crimea. As for Tervel, he led his army into the Thrace, pillaging the Byzantine province when tribute ceased to flow. Still, he offered precious military help to Constantinople when it was besieged by the Arabs in 717, knowing he would benefit from a generous reward. As a rule, the Bulgars executed those of their leaders who lost battles or made peace with an enemy, an exception to this being when a rich reward was attached to such a compromise.

The Khazars and Byzantine rulers also cultivated strong friendships. Leo III (r. 717–741) married his son, the future Emperor Constantine V, to the khan's daughter, who was baptized Irene in 733. This marriage provided a bond between the distant states, and for many years to come it prevented barbarian invasions of that area along the Black Sea coast. Emperor Leo VI (r. 886–912) took the epithet “the Wise” because he was a philosopher. He was also recognized for his acuity in employing the Magyars, whom he had transported by ship in 895 to invade Bulgaria while the Bulgarians were conducting a pillaging campaign in the Byzantine territories. That invasion constituted revenge against Czar Simeon I (r. 893–927), who had once been a humiliated hostage of Constantinople and now declared himself Emperor of Bulgaria. His army was caught between two massive attacks from opposing sides. In desperation, he appealed to the powerful Pechenegs, former allies of the Byzantines in their fight against the Kievan Rus. In 897 they were victorious against Constantinople and forced it to accept peace and pay a tribute. The Pechenegs then turned against a group who had been a perennial menace to them—the Magyars; they defeated them so thoroughly that they were pushed out of the Balkan Peninsula and off their land east of the Prut River, and driven to an area north of the Black Sea. The catastrophic side effect of this was that the Magyars were forced to migrate west above Pecheneg-occupied Dacia; under their king, Arpad, they finally settled west of the Tisza River. After they had dislodged the Slavic tribes from Pannonia, the Magyars ended up in what is today Hungary. Once again, a chain of volatile alliances had led to unpredictable events that proved have historical importance.

The Bulgars came to pose the greatest threat to the Byzantines as they could do little to stop their leader, Simeon, from winning nearly every war he fought. Soon, he would create the First Bulgarian Empire, one that would extend from the Adriatic and Aegean Seas to the Black Sea. In so doing, he alienated many other neighboring barbarian tribes. Predictably, they then put aside their differences in an effort to form a loose anti-Bulgarian coalition. While the Pechenegs were waiting on the sidelines to see who would pay them the most, Simeon aimed his forces at his strongest enemy—the Byzantine army. He annihilated it in August 917 at Acheloos. This was followed by another victory, whereupon Constantinople was forced to recognize the Bulgarian Empire with Simeon as its undisputed ruler. Yet, when Empress Zoe refused to allow her son, the future emperor Constantine VII, to marry Simeon's daughter, she had no option but to ally her kingdom with the Magyars, Serbs, and other Slavs who all hated the Bulgars.

In 924, in a state of fury, Czar Simeon successfully battled the Serbs and, after beheading the captive Serbian nobility, annexed their state. While the barbarian allies were busy pushing the Bulgarians away from the area north of

the Danube, the Magyars settled in Pannonia. It then became a sort of reservoir of resources for a savage enemy of the Byzantines. Czar Simeon, who never ceased his plunder of the Byzantine Empire, died of a stroke after a failed attack on Constantinople. He had bitterly fought the Byzantines who crowned him czar and allowed the Bulgarians to settle in Moesia, thereby putting them on the map. With three major players—Bulgaria, Hungary, and Serbia—involved in Byzantine affairs, the military dynamics of the Balkans became a complicated matter, and future alliances were destined to fall apart.

Factions of barbarians frequently struck up alliances among themselves and attacked the Byzantine Empire, an act of aggression for which there were many precedents as well as a reasonable expectations of gain. When he invaded the Bulgarian and the Byzantine Empires, the Kievan Prince Sviatoslav was attacked in his home state by the Pechenegs who had, in turn, been manipulated by the Byzantines. He defeated the Pechenegs and, after convincing them to join his forces, pillaged Bulgaria; they sacked its capital Preslav and the city of Philippopolis in Thracia, where they impaled some twenty thousand captives who heroically resisted the siege. Sviatoslav also used the Pechenegs to shatter the Khazar dominance of the Ukraine land, only to end up being assassinated by his allies. With the arrival of the Cumans and Patzinaks in the former area of Dacia, another formidable barbarian power was available for hire. The Bulgars of Dobrudja quickly employed them to strike against Byzantine domination and protest its heavy taxation. A horde of “about 80,000 men,”² Slavs, Patzinaks, and Vlachians were “led by one Solomon,”³ the former king of Hungary. How Solomon became a leader of such an unlikely alliance is explainable only in terms of the other alliances within the Hungarian realm which had been made and then broken.

Solomon was the successor to a sorrowful legacy. He was the son of King Andrew I whose brother Bela had allied himself with King Boleslaw II; the latter’s Polish troops had installed Bela on the Hungarian throne. Solomon left for Austria from whence he returned with German troops. He gained the crown after he married King Henry III’s daughter in 1063. However, Bela’s three sons took advantage of the Polish alliance and together entered Hungary. One of his sons, Geza I, dethroned Solomon in 1074, but Solomon, who was once again helped by Henry’s army, returned to Hungary. In the meantime, the country had elected Ladislaw I (Geza’s brother) as king. Solomon failed to gain any further foreign support and ended up in prison. When he was finally released, he fled to the enemy territory of Dacia where he married the daughter of a Pecheneg chieftain. In 1085 a Pecheneg expedition led by Solomon invaded Hungary but was defeated. However, the ex-Hungarian king continued to lead barbarian raids into the Byzantine Empire where he died in 1087 while fighting near Adrianople.

These raids were carried out mainly by Patzinaks (also called Scyths), who plundered south of the Danube into Thracia for two years, decimating every Byzantine army they encountered and killing its two capable generals. The Patzinaks sought an alliance with the Byzantines, but “Alexius saw through the Scythian fraud: their embassy was an attempt to evade the imminent peril...and he refused to hear the envoys.”⁴ Indeed, the emperor successfully attacked the barbarians who, even in the face of defeat, pillaged many provinces while they were retreating; later the emperor had no choice but to pay a ransom for those of his people who had been captured. The barbarians returned to Dacia with much needed plunder. On their way back, they met the army of the Cumans to whom they previously had appealed for help in defeating the Byzantines, but their help was no longer needed. When the Cumans saw the enormous booty and the multitude of prisoners, they wanted their share and told the “Scythian” chieftains:

We have come a great distance to help you, with the purpose of sharing your danger and your victory. Now that we have contributed all that we could, it is not right to send us away empty-handed. It was not from choice that we arrived too late for the war, nor are we to be blamed for that...Either therefore divide up all the booty in equal shares with us, or instead of allies you will find us ready to fight you.⁵

The Scyths refused, so the Cumans launched a punishing attack against them. It was a disaster for the Scyths, who fled for their lives. At this point, the barbarian coalition broke down, and Emperor Alexius I selectively drew on the resources offered by either side, for the most part, the stronger horde of Cumans who had successfully battled their co-tribes in 1091. But this shift created an even more serious problem: the victorious Cumans invaded Byzantine lands on their own in 1114, only to be forced back by the emperor’s better trained troops.

A new wave of Patzinaks, dislocated from above Black Sea, “crossed the Istros [Danube River] and plundered Thrace, destroying everything under foot more absolutely than a host of locusts.”⁶ Emperor John II (r. 1118–1143) advanced with his army to meet the invaders and tried to negotiate their withdrawal with an invitation to some of the chieftains whom “he won over [and] greeted with every kindness. He set sumptuous feasts before them and charmed them with gifts of silk garments and silver cups and basins.”⁷ Without realizing it, the emperor had just intensified the greed of the barbarian leaders who now saw how many more riches were potentially available to them. During the truce, more Byzantine troops had arrived to join the main defensive force that ultimately defeated the barbarians. In that same year (1122), John made the best of the fact that he had access to these victorious

troops and attacked the Serbs (called Tribaloι by Niketas), who also habitually plundered the imperial lands. After winning a decisive victory, his troops looted the Serb settlements and relocated the captives to the fertile province of Nikodemia. Four years later, Niketas described another invasion: “In the summer [1127], the Hungarians crossed the Istros and sacked Braničevo, where they tore down the walls, whose stones they transported to Zevgminon. They also plundered Sardica, again repudiating and tearing into shreds their treaties of friendship.”⁸ The reason for this was that Duke Almos, brother of Hungarian ruler Stephen II, defected to the Byzantine camp where he was well received. Once again, John and his troops, who were in good military condition to intervene in the bloody conflict, defeated the Hungarians and recovered the Byzantine land occupied by them. The emperor imposed a truce on all of these barbarians, and, believing he had achieved a lasting peace, turned his attention to the Turkish invaders in Anatolia.

Often an alliance was planned in advance and meticulously orchestrated, as was the case with Manuel I (r. 1143–1180) and the Hungarians. The emperor was on his way to restore the glory and the power of the Byzantine Empire, and for that reason he needed weaker enemies. When King Geza II died in 1162, his brothers Istvan IV and Laszlo II were already in Constantinople befriending Manuel, aiming to make him their ally and protector. Istvan went so far as to marry a niece of the emperor in exchange for the Hungarian throne. But Laszlo knew better and refused to marry a non-Catholic since this would cause the Hungarians to reject him as a monarch. They accepted Geza’s son Istvan III, who had already been named the legitimate heir to the throne by his father, and, as predicted, denied Istvan’s candidacy, fearing that Manuel would turn Hungary into a satrapy of Constantinople. Manuel used military force to intimidate the Hungarians and bribery to convince their nobility to accept Istvan as their ruler. Meanwhile Geza’s son, Bela III, almost married the emperor’s daughter and so forced the Hungarians to compromise and chose Laszlo as their king. But Emanuel threatened them with war, and Istvan IV gained the throne in 1163. In the meantime, Istvan III found a powerful ally in the person of Frederick I, who ruled the Holy Roman Empire. He provided troops to dethrone Istvan IV, who was later poisoned to death. Istvan III kept his throne for nine years by handing Croatia and Dalmatia over to the Byzantines and sending his brother Bela as hostage to Constantinople, where he took the Christian name of Alexius. After Istvan’s sudden death, Bela promised a large sum of money and unconditional loyalty to Manuel I, and so became the next Hungarian king (r. 1172–1196).⁹ After Emanuel died in 1180, Bela III considered himself to be relieved of the oath he had taken and re-conquered all the Byzantine provinces granted to Manuel by each former candidate to the Hungarian throne. After striking an alliance with the new

Emperor Alexius II, Bela further cemented his alliance with the Byzantines by marrying his daughter to the next Emperor Isaac II (r. 1185–1195 and 1203–1204). Both of them fought against Serbian expansionism. After his wife's death, Bella married the daughter of Louis VII, thus establishing a lucrative connection to France, one that would put Hungary on the path toward sound cultural development.

Greed and vanity were the main attributes of Emperor Isaac II, who married the daughter of King Bela III in order to establish an alliance with the powerful Magyars. But the excessive taxation he imposed in order to finance his wars against the invading Normans and pay for his wedding led to a Vlachian uprising in Moesia. When Frederick I Barbarossa advanced through the Byzantine lands with his crusaders, Isaac allied himself with Saladin, the sultan of Egypt and Syria and the deadly enemy of the German emperor. The Third Crusade against the Turks was seriously sabotaged when the Byzantines blocked their march through the Balkan Peninsula and the Germans conquered Philippopolis in August 1189. A Byzantine army which was sent to push the Germans back failed in its mission, and in their effort to retreat, the soldiers plundered their own people. Afraid of losing his throne, Isaac finally granted passage to the crusaders, and Frederick arrived in Gallipoli from which point his knights were ferried toward Asia Minor. Isaac's failure to defeat the revolting Vlachs and recognize their "empire" created resentment and led to his being dethroned, blinded, and imprisoned by his brother Alexius III.

The Vlachs constituted a special ethnic block within the Balkans because their livelihood was not restricted by any borders. Emperor Basil II mentioned them in a decree of 1020 as the "Vlachs of all Bulgaria." Shortly after Constantine VIII used Vlachians as mercenaries, the author Kekaumenos described their revolt from Thessaly in 1066. He also described them as descendents of the Dacians and the Bessoi (the latter were never part of ancient Dacia), but in the time of Kekaumenos they were living with the Vlachian population in the province of Thracia. He mentioned that their King Decebalus had been defeated by Roman Emperor Trajan in Transylvania, north of the Danube. Anna Comnena described how Emperor Alexius tried "to enroll new men for a term of duty from the Bulgars and the nomads (commonly called Vlachs)."¹⁰ Indeed, these men were shepherds who lived all over the Balkans and were not subject to any geographical borders. Comnena also wrote that "a certain Poudilus, one of the leading Vlachs, came and reported [to Emperor Alexius I] that the Cumans were crossing the Danube."¹¹ In another instance, she noted that "the Cumans were shown the way through the passes by the Vlachs."¹²

As mentioned in previous chapters, the Vlachs/Wallachians were the inheritors of the Daco-Roman legacy, dispersed throughout Eastern Europe.

Because of that demographic, they could forge reliable alliances among themselves that proved dangerous to other groups. A case in point is the Asan brothers' revolt in 1186. They asked for military help from their relatives in Greater Wallachia north of the Danube (at this point under Cuman occupation); the Vlachian brothers returned to Moesia with the needed help and subsequently benefitted from Cuman participation in their anti-Byzantine coalition. Niketas recorded that by the middle of 1197 Emperor Alexius III had decided "to bring deliverance to the Thracian cities which were ravaged by the Vlachs and Cumans."¹³ But the motives of each party were considerably different: while the Cumans were there to plunder the cities, the Vlachs had united to enforce their rights and gain national recognition from the Byzantines.

The revolt lasted for more than ten years and led to an independent Vlach-Bulgarian state under King Ioannitsa (Kaloyan). In 1189 he believed he had found a reliable ally in Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, who had broken an alliance with the Byzantines. The Vlach king wanted to join the crusaders in order to conquer Constantinople and eventually destroy the Byzantine Empire. He was turned down because Barbarossa's ultimate mission was to liberate the Holy Land, not to get entangled in Balkan affairs. The Vlach-based army scored one victory after another against the Byzantines, while Ioannitsa sought recognition of his reign and the title of emperor. Furthermore, Pope Innocent III saw the advantages of having the Vlachs in his camp and initiated a long and complicated correspondence to establish a Catholic foothold in the middle of the Balkans, something he had not succeeded in doing in Bulgaria.

While the pope persisted in dragging his feet on a commitment to recognize Ioannitsa as emperor, the Fourth Crusade entered the Vlachian territory. He sought an alliance with the Latin knights and attempted to impress them with his victories against the Byzantines. His expectation of their success proved correct when the crusaders entered Constantinople in 1204 to install Alexius IV on the throne. Soon the new emperor needed the powerful Vlachs and Cumans as allies to protect him from the fury of the crusaders who had turned against him. In exchange, he would grant the imperial title to Ioannitsa, along with patriarchal independence. As it turned out, the following year the crusaders savagely sacked Constantinople because they had not been paid the sum promised by Alexius. A new Latin Empire then developed, and new governmental rules and borders were established in the Balkans.

Adapting to this new Balkan order, Ioannitsa again extended his friendship to the occupying Western knights, only to be treated in ways that might befit a slave, but certainly not the king of the thoroughly tested brave Vlachs. Instantly, the knights became the object of his fury, and Ioannitsa allied with

the former Byzantine enemies who had escaped the predacious Latins. By late 1204, he was in charge of a powerful military coalition. It put the Vlachs in a position to demand of the pope that he order his knights to return all their ancient lands that had been placed under the control of the Latin Empire. If the pope did not agree, Ioannitsa would fight the crusaders, which he successfully did for the next three years, occupying much of Macedonia and Thracia. However, he essentially became too powerful for his own good. His trusted allies, the Byzantines and Cumans, became uncomfortable when the Vlachs became a major power in the Balkans. Ioannitsa, the emperor-to-be, was assassinated by a Cuman chieftain in October 1207 while conducting an attack on Thessaloniki/Salonica in Greece.

The year 1172 was not a good one for Grand Prince Nemanja of Serbia. His anti-Byzantine coalition with the Venetians and Hungarians collapsed, and his Serbian army was massacred by Emperor Manuel I. The latter was on his way to recover the imperial lands that he had lost to barbarian invasions. In order to save his life and his “empire,” the proud Nemanja walked barefoot to Manuel, surrendered his sword, and allowed himself to be taken to Constantinople where he could redeem himself. In time he regained Manuel’s trust, and after pledging never to violate it again, he was reinstated on the Serbian throne. But Manuel died in 1180, and Nemanja considered his sacred vow to have expired: he had given it to a specific emperor, not to the entire Byzantine Empire. He then decided to attempt to reoccupy what he viewed as Serbian lands. Three years later he allied himself with King Bela III of Hungary; their united armies took over the key cities of Belgrade, Niss, and Sofia, among others, as well as several adjoining regions. Changing camps in 1191, Bela united with his son-in-law Emperor Isaac II against Nemanja.

When the Hungarians unexpectedly left the coalition and headed home, the aging Nemanja found himself in a most vulnerable position—he was once again facing the Byzantine might alone. He quickly proposed that Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa discontinue his crusade to the Holy Land, and offered him twenty thousand Serbian troops to attack Constantinople. The Byzantines learned about the secret plan, and Emperor Isaac II blocked the Germans from reaching Sofia. Taking advantage of the fact that these two emperors were locked in conflict in their efforts to impose their wills on each other, Nemanja directed his army to occupy the land from Kosovo to Skopje, and then incorporated it into the Serbian state. Isaac could not tolerate such losses, and in 1191 he led an expeditionary force that decimated the Serbian forces in South Moravia; the octogenarian Nemanja then went into hiding. But the Serbs were not finished. They continued to harass the Byzantines, forcing them to fight an unconventional war they could not win. When in year 1186 Nemanja’s son, Stefan, married Princess Eudocia of Constantinople and disputed lands

were divided among in-laws in an effort to make peace, the underlying concern was still that the Serbs might ally themselves with the Bulgarians. Thus Kosovo and Zeta, as well as other provinces, came under Serbian domination. In 1196 Nemanja abdicated in favor of Stefan II and became a monk. His sons fought against each other until Vukan won and forced Stefan to leave the country. As Niketas pointed out: "When fratricide spread as a pattern, model, and general law from the queen of cities to the far corners of the earth, not only Turks, Russians, Serbs, and afterwards Hungarians [1203], but also the remaining rulers of barbarian nations filled their countries with seditions and murders, drawing their swords against their own kinsmen."¹⁴

The Serbian saga continued when Stefan's oldest brother, Vukan/Vlkan, allied with Pope Innocent III and the Hungarian King Emerich, and with their help dethroned and expelled Stefan. Serbia now faced both religious reform and Hungarian vassalage. Taking full advantage of the religious and political situation, Stefan (now exiled in Bulgaria) pursued the Vlachian king Ioannitsa to militarily endorse an attempt to seize the throne in exchange for eastern Serbian lands. The Bosnians also claimed some Serbian lands, and the opportunistic Stefan found them to be a ready ally and useful in overthrowing his brother. He regained power in 1204. When Constantinople was sacked by the crusaders that same year, Stefan divorced his Byzantine wife and married Anna, the granddaughter of Dandolo, Doge of Venice and the blind leader of the crusaders. Stefan promptly pledged his alliance to Rome, and Pope Honorius III crowned him the first Serbian King in 1217. Not surprisingly, the Serbs could not accept Catholicism, and Stefan broke the alliance with the pope, mostly because his other brother Sava established an independent Orthodoxy of Serbia and crowned Stefan as the rightful king and head of the Serbian Church. If Serbia had not entered into these volatile alliances, it would not have survived to become a powerful empire in the next century.

As for the Komnenos family who ruled the Byzantine Empire at that time, they continued to look for new opportunities to form alliances as its various members wanted to either succeed to, or to keep control of, the throne. They were a far cry from Manuel I who recovered most of the Balkan territories through straightforward wars or diplomacy and retained what was conquered by Basil II. However, after his death the conflicts between the royals (Isaac II was dethroned in 1195 and blinded by his own brother, Alexius III) forced emperors to ally with the enemies of the empire in order to secure their crown. Isaac and his son even defected to the Turks, while Alexius led the Normans into a devastating raid on Greece. But the mortal blow for the empire came from Alexius IV (the son of Isaac II), who led the crusaders to conquer Constantinople for his own gain and became emperor for a mere six months. Whoever promised a larger bribe to the enemies of the empire had a

better chance of ruling it at the expense of the Byzantine people. The rest of the Balkan Peninsula was in royal and military turmoil as well.

When Michael III of Bulgaria wanted to invade Serbia in 1330, he did what the Asan kings always did during military crises—he appealed to brethren Vlachs from the other side of the Danube for help. His army was reinforced with Wallachian and Moldavian contingents, but they were defeated in a surprising night attack by Prince Stefan Dusan IV. Czar Michael was captured and died from battle wounds; thus he paid the ultimate price for divorcing Stefan Uros II's daughter Anna and marrying Byzantine princess Theodora to cement an alliance against the Serbians. After Stefan IV imprisoned and killed his father, Uros III, by strangling him, he married the sister of the new Bulgarian Czar John/Ivan Alexander, nephew of the deceased Michael Shishman. Taking full advantage of the new alliance, King Stefan Uros IV invaded the Byzantine Empire, completely disregarding the fact that he was supposed to be an ally of Constantinople which had sheltered him for six years. His military move could not have been better timed: in Constantinople the imperial command was at its lowest point due to the civil war (1341–1347) that had erupted between the underage Emperor John V Palaiologos and his regent John VI Kantakuzenos, both of whom were backed by adversarial and self-interested factions.

Because neither of them was strong enough to win in the six-year struggle for power that followed, they both appealed for and accepted foreign aid, relying on mercenary troops of any conceivable origin. Quick to capitalize on the empire's misfortunes, Dusan IV extracted enormous favors from it while at the same time allying himself with either candidate. His Serbs occupied Macedonia and extended their domination in the southwest as far as the Peloponnesus. Dusan aimed to conquer Constantinople and even approached the pope to sanction his grand ambition to create a new Greco-Serbian Empire. Yet, the experienced General John VI found a formidable ally in Sultan Orhan from Anatolia, who sent ten thousand Turks to repulse the Serbs and restore order in favor of the contender to the throne.

The Turks did just that, but their successful endeavor led to astonishing complications when they occupied Gallipoli in 1345 and refused to leave, probably because they were not paid in full for their mercenary services. Once again, Dusan was quick to take advantage of the situation and declared himself "Emperor and autocrat of Serbs and Greeks" (1346–1355), thereby establishing his own Serbian patriarchy. Using the favorable momentum he had gained, he conquered Epirus and Thessaly. His empire then expanded to its maximal geographic size, almost replacing the Byzantine Empire in the Balkans. By now he wanted to carry out a crusade of his own against the Turks, and he urged Pope Innocent VI to mobilize the rest of the European

knights and the Venetians to provide the necessary fleet to eliminate the Muslims from Europe. But Stefan Dusan-the Mighty went too far in seeking Western allies who would introduce their Catholicism into the Orthodox Balkans. In 1355 the Serbian emperor was poisoned by his own court and died. As for the Turks, they extended their military power and domination by declaring Adrianople their European capital in 1366 and renaming it Edirne. This permanently sealed the fate of the Balkan Peninsula and its nations.

With Ottoman power growing ever stronger and more land in the Balkans being occupied, a Christian coalition was a vital necessity. The Ottomans had to be stopped from overrunning Central Europe. The Battle at Kosovo Polye in 1389 demonstrated the firm commitment by the anti-Ottoman alliance of Prince Lazar of Serbia to King Stephen of Bosnia, Czar Ivan of Bulgaria, and Prince Mircea the Elder of Wallachia, plus small contingents of Albanians and Croats. All of these militaries fought the Turks under sultans Murad I and Bayezid I. The Christian coalition lost the war, and Serbia faced Ottoman occupation. Many Serbian elitists tried to make the best of the situation by marrying their daughters to the sultan and his nobility. In 1396, this new alliance had a disastrous impact and another sad story attached to it. In the Battle of Nicopolis, the last and strongest Christian coalition of Bohemian, Bulgarian, Burgundian, Dutch, English, French, Germans, Italian, Polish, Scottish, Swiss, and Wallachian troops, supported by the Genovese and Venetian fleet, was defeated by a coalition of the Ottomans and Serbs. The reason for the Christian defeat was not lack of bravery, but lack of unity in combat. That military fault was deeply rooted in the nationalistic and social order of the various crusaders:

The sense of unity and universality that had been the foundation of Empire and Papacy in the early Middle Ages was passing away, and in its place the separatism of independent kingdoms was arising. This new separatist tendency demonstrated itself amidst the crusading medley before Nicopolis. There was no unity of purpose, no unity of arms and companies, and no common tactics in the camp of the Christians. The Turkish army was, on the other hand, a perfect example of the most stringent discipline, of a rigorous and even fanatic unity of purpose, of the concentration of supreme tactical power in the sole person of the Sultan.¹⁵

Two other notable elements marked the crusaders' defeat: the refusal of the Wallachians and the Transylvanian cavalry corps (under Prince Mircea) to engage in the fight, and the crucial charge of the Serbian Despot Stephen Lazarovich whose five thousand horsemen helped the almost defeated Ottomans win the battle. This did not stop the Turks from later occupying Serbia.

In the meantime, given that their borders were directly threatened, the Hungarians signed a pact with the Ottoman Empire on July 12, 1444, “written both in the Hungarian and Turkish languages; King Ladislaus Jagelo swore upon the Gospels, and the sultan swore upon the Koran, that it should be truly and religiously observed.”¹⁶ The solemn pact was soon breached by the young Jagelo when he joined a military coalition of Bohemians, Bosnians, Croatians, Germans, Moldavians, Polish, and Wallachians, supported by the Genovese, Papal, and Venetian fleet. All of these groups had decided to forever push the Turks out the Balkans. The former adversarial armies met in the same year on a battlefield near fortress of Varna where they duplicated the disaster of Nicopolis. Still another Christian coalition came together four years later, this time with the reduced participation of Hungary, Moldavia, and Wallachia, but along with some late arrivals—the Albanians. During the second Battle at Kosovo in 1448, firearms proved their superiority to other weapons, and the Ottomans once again dominated.

The Turkish army had annihilated the militaries involved in three consecutive Balkan crusades, and the future looked gloomy for the Eastern European nations. The Ottomans were nevertheless defeated in the middle of Moldavia in 1475 at Vaslui, but the Turks claimed ownership of the Dacian land of Bessarabia (renamed Budjak) east of the Prut River. The conflict produced the unlikely coalition of this area’s rightful owners, the Moldavians, and the aspiring owners, the Poles and Hungarians (the latter participating with only a symbolic few thousands soldiers); both were eager to occupy the land. The Turks were supported by the Bulgarians and Wallachians, who also hoped for a slice of the disputed area. To confuse the issue still further, the Moldavian coalition was led by Stefan the Great, who in 1462 had allied with the Turks against Prince Dracula over the same land. This time the Moldavian coalition won the Battle at Vaslui, and sure enough, Stefan and Dracula (who were first cousins) allied against the Turks to liberate Wallachia. A special solidarity always existed between the Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, based on their common ancestry, language, and religion. They gained independence in the middle of the fourteenth century through the military actions of voievodes/princes Bogdan I (r. 1359–1365) and Basarab I (r. 1310–1352). The Moldavian successors, Petru Aron and Stefan the Great (r. 1475–1504), pledged their vassalage to the kings of Hungary and Poland and ultimately to the sultan of the Ottoman Empire. In Wallachia, Mircea the Elder (r. 1386–1418) bravely fought the Turks, scoring a major victory at Rovine in 1395 and single-handedly repelling two Ottoman invasions of Wallachia. That entitled him to interfere in the civil war between the sons of Beyazid I; hence in 1411 he supported Prince Musa for the Ottoman throne against his other brothers. If Musa had won, Romanian

history would be different, but he lost and thus drew the enmity of the next sultan, Mehmed I.

Since the odds were severely stacked against him, Prince Mircea agreed to pay tribute to the Ottoman Empire in exchange for ensuring Wallachia's freedom. But his son Prince Vlad II (r. 1436–1442 and 1443–1447), the son of Mircea, sought help to gain the throne by joining the Order of the Dragon in Nuremberg. This made him a pro-Catholic and anti-Ottoman knight. Soon he realized he could not fulfill any of these obligations; he was assassinated by his boyars. His son Vlad III Dracula (r. 1448, 1456–1462, 1476) tried to renew the alliances his father had created, but he switched them too often and so lost and gained the throne just like his father had. Dependence on foreign benevolence had again proved problematic. Having created similar, unstable alliances, Princes Dan II and Laiota ruled Wallachia during five different periods before and after Dracula. The latter failed to put together a Christian coalition and stubbornly fought the Turks on his own. But before he was able to take part in a favorable alliance, Dracula the Impaler met the same tragic end as his father. The Wallachian and Moldavian rulers often acted as suzerains without paying the customary tribute to any of the super-powers to whom they formally “submitted.” They simply became allies to each fierce rival of Hungary, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire, playing them off against each other each while maintaining the independence of the Romanian people. The typical situation presented itself before the Crusade of Nicopolis,

when Mircea [the Wallachian ruler], who had been hesitating between the Turks and the Hungarians, had eventually fled to Sigismund's court, where he was well received and was granted the duchy of Fogaras [Fagaras] and the county of Severin. Mircea's flight was not actuated by love towards his Christian neighbour and hatred to an infidel sultan; nor was Sigismund's bequest a Christian act of charity to a dethroned, but noble ally. The Wallachian prince meant simply to play off one deadly enemy against another, while the Hungarian monarch intended to seize a golden opportunity for the subjugation of a restless neighbour, whom he hoped to employ against the Turks. Whatever their secret aims may have been, their interests coincided for a time in presence of a common foe.¹⁷

The two Romanian principalities found their most powerful ally in John Hunyadi, voivode of Transylvania (1441–1444), captain-general (1444–1446), and regent of Hungary (1446–1453), who, due to his Wallachian origin,¹⁸ was willing to help the Romanians. When a Turkish army tried to pillage Wallachia in 1442, Hunyadi defeated them at Sibiu, and, in time, ensured the independence of the Romanian principalities. The fact that his first language was Romanian helped him become the voivode of Transylvania, where the majority of the population was Vlachian.¹⁹ He successfully

supported Wladislaw III (r. 1434–1444), who became the king of Poland and Hungary, an act that secured him a strong position among the Hungarians. John Hunyadi was catapulted to military stardom by his many crushing victories against the invading Ottoman armies in Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Herzegovina, Hungary, Serbia, and Wallachia. Since he was a main defender of Christendom and called the “White Knight of Wallachia,” he was given the title of *Atleta Cristi* by the pope when he undertook the defense of Belgrade on his own. (No Hungarian noblemen wanted to join this battle against the Ottomans.) Hunyadi died of the plague in 1456 in Belgrade; he was buried at Alba Julia in Transylvania, a fact that attests to his non-Hungarian origin.²⁰ During his illustrious military career, Hunyadi succeeded in maintaining most of the borders of the Danubian basin and preventing the Ottomans from invading Hungary and the Romanian lands. But the inevitable happened when the allied Christian nations could not replace their lost soldiers for another crusade against the Turks. An inexhaustible supply of replacements was available for fallen Turks, and, once again, numbers decided the outcome of wars and the course of history. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Byzantine Empire came to an end. At that point, the power of the Muslim Crescent dominated the entirety of the Balkans. It was only a matter of years until the Ottoman Empire would take over the whole Peninsula and the land beyond it.

The history of this era shows that kings and monarchs trusted mercenaries for protection more than they did their own people. The foreigners had none of the impediments of inherited feelings of revenge, nor were they nationalistic or susceptible to religious pathos. Furthermore, they were in no way attached to any disputed land. When they allied themselves with foreign powers, these rulers increased their national military potential because they were counting on support that was usually more reliable than that which they would have received from domestic sources. Most of the time, alliances kept a nation from defecting to the enemy. The next best way to maintain an alliance was to exchange hostages, mainly close relatives of the rulers involved. Broken trust and misplaced faith made for a bad legacy. Typically, an alliance was defined by who won a war. A victor attracted submissive partners, groups that were in need of defense. But often the losers also united to crush the victor and retrieve lost land and people and restore national pride.

In all of this, there seems to have been one rule that never changed: the one in need bit the hand that fed it; hence, an ally in need was an ally no one needed. This was the reason why, after the failed Crusade of Nicopolis, the Western powers, who had lost their best knights battling the Turks and who had spent a huge amount of money (two hundred thousand florins in gold) to ransom the survivors, did not mobilize again to help Eastern Europe in

a doomed fight, as they had not done in Varna in 1444 and Constantinople in 1453. Consequently, at the end of the fifteenth century a Turkofil policy was adopted by many Balkan states in order to avoid self-destruction. Still, if there was even the slightest hope of winning a battle or war, they would readily rise up against Ottoman domination. This ongoing struggle created unexpected alliances and governed the unfolding of historical events for centuries to come.

NOTES

1. Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 230.

2. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 217. Comnena mistakenly described them as “Sarmatians Scyths and a large contingent of Dacians.”

3. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 217.

4. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 221.

5. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 228–229.

6. Niketas Choniātēs, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniātēs*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 10.

7. Choniātēs, *O City*, 10.

8. Choniātēs, *O City*, 11.

9. Bela was so spoiled by Emanuel that he hoped to inherit the Byzantine crown along with the Hungarian throne. But the emperor was surprised with a son and Bela lost his affection and was also dropped from the list of his daughter’s prospects for a husband. Worse yet, Bela-the-Constantinopolitan became a Hungarian king (supported by a Byzantine contingent) whom no one wanted, including his mother. After sending her into exile and imprisoning his other brother, he convinced the Hungarian Church of his Catholic faith, all the while remaining obedient to his Orthodox benefactor Emanuel, and even putting the Byzantine double cross on his coat-of-arms and Hungarian coins. Bela was highly sophisticated by standards in his semi-barbarian nation, and so introduced reforms that entitled him to be called the Hungarian Empire Builder.

10. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 252.

11. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 298.

12. Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 299.

13. Choniātēs, *O City*, 267.

14. Choniātēs, *O City*, 292.

15. Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: Methuen, 1934), 71.

16. Edward S. Creasy, *History of the Ottoman Turks* (Beirut: Khayats, 1961), 66.

17. Atiya, *Crusade of Nicopolis*, 7.

18. Historian Matthew Spinka described him as a “man who became the most famous Turkokiller, the Romanian general John Hunyadi” in *A History of Christianity in the Balkans: A Study in the Spread of Byzantine Culture Among the Slavs* (Ham-

den, CT: Archon Books, 1968), 153. In many documents Hunyadi is simply named Janos Olah (*Olah* being the Hungarian word for Vlach/Wallachian). The counter-argument is that today in Hungary many family names are Olah, an obvious “important name,” the Romanians might add.

19. Born in the Wallachian village of Corbi/Ravens, to a Vlach father and a Transylvanian mother, at baptism his first name was Ioan or Iancu and last name Voicu. When his father later moved to his wife’s estate in Hunedoara in Banat, he adopted the last name of Hunyadi in 1409 to honor the Hunyadi Castle which he had received as a present from King Sigismund. His son John/Ioan/Iancu/Joannes/Janos, who was known by the full name Ioan Corvin de Hunedoara (abbreviated in English as John Hunyadi; Edward Gibbon spelled his last name Huniades) proved to be born a military leader, in spite of the fact that he was not able to read or write—an indication that he did not come from Hungarian nobility, especially because his first tongue was Romanian. In numerous battles he commanded the Romanian contingents, and in the Battle at Varna the Wallachian troops saved his life while he was making a desperate retreat.

20. The Corvinus House was named after Hunyadi’s Romanian birthplace Corbi. His son Matthias was born at Napoca/Cluj, an ancient Dacian city in Transylvania (where his equestrian statue now stands), and most likely he spoke Romanian before he learned Hungarian. Probably his birth name was Matei Corvin or Mateiaș Corvin. After his father’s death he had to be rescued from the Hungarian nobility who had taken the young Matthias to be a foreigner and condemned him to death. He was rescued by the governor of Bohemia and given shelter in Prague. He took the throne of Hungary with the help of his Transylvanian uncle Mihai/Mihaly Szilagy, who led an army and forced the Hungarian Diet to elect Matthias as king while he was still in Prague. In defiance of the Hungarian nobility, the young monarch proudly displayed the raven on his coat of arms. It was later given a mythical interpretation by the Hungarian biographers, some of whom still deny Hunyadi’s lineage. King Matthias (also known in Europe as the Raven King, *Mateja Korvina*, and *Matej Corvine*) was by far the greatest ruler of Hungary. He made it into an empire at the time of its greatest geographical extent, but after his death, his son Janos Corvinus was rejected as heir to the throne by the Hungarians. The “raven dynasty” came to an end; after the fall of Communism in 1990, the free Hungarian Parliament voted to restore the traditional crowned coat of arms without the once iconic Corvinus bird, yet retaining the Byzantine double cross.

Chapter Five

The Area's Shifting Borders

Ancient borders traditionally followed the lines of rivers and valleys or mountain ridges, but the Danube River, as also the Carpathian Mountains, offered little resistance to the hungry and homeless nomads of the Middle Ages. The border of the Byzantine Empire consisted of the basic *vallum* of elevated earthworks with fortified towers and garrisons, a defense system inherited from Roman times. It was, however, inadequate for thwarting the massive barbarian invasions from Eurasia. Within the empire there were provincial borders, regional lines of demarcation, city limits, and other topographic partitions, each of which had its own ethnicity, administration, economy, cultural, and religious institutions. In the beginning, borders meant nothing to the barbarian raiders, but, over time, they found themselves drawing their own on the basis of military takeovers; establishing a border was a way to gain status. It identified a forceful leader who had consolidated his power so as to defend one segment of land or conquer another. The simplest means of acquiring new land was marriage between leading families, but the most effective way to impose new borders on top of old ones was, as always, large scale invasions and military conquests.

While the Byzantine armies appeared to be keeping the brazen Gepids and Avars in check (because they seemed to be willing to negotiate), the Slavic tribes who arrived at the fringes of the empire presented a more difficult challenge. When the emperors in Constantinople were militarily strong, they were able to keep the invaders in a position of semi-vassalage. When they were weak, the barbarians rampaged throughout the Byzantine provinces attempting to extend the borders of their chiefdoms. Rudimentarily armed with farm tools but also with poisoned arrows, the Slavs compensated for their lack of advanced weaponry with a large supply of foot soldiers; their cavalry had mastered new weapons—the lasso and the net which were used to inca-

pacitate and capture the enemy. Their lack of stone-throwing machinery and siege tactics, however, made the Slavs hesitant to attack fortresses or fortified cities. Like many other barbarians, they preferred to fight in swamps, thick forests, and along the narrow river valleys that were ideal for ambushes and quick escapes; also, they often conducted their raids during the winter.

Because he was aware of the barbarians' weak points, Emperor Justinian I paid a great deal of attention to the natural defensive line provided by the Danube River and enforced it with fifty-two fortresses; at the same time he guarded his native Dacia Mediterranea with sixty-nine fortresses. As a precaution, he built defensive lines with twenty-seven fortresses in the middle of Dacian Moesia, forty-six fortresses in Macedonia, and thirty-seven in Epirus, Thessaly, Thracia, and Southern Greece. Meanwhile, Justinian tried to confine the Slavs to Pannonia where he granted them settlement lands and offered an annual subsidy to keep them peaceful and uninterested in crossing the Danube. All of these military and political measures secured the safety and prosperity of the Byzantine Empire while it was enjoying a golden age that would never again be duplicated.

In fact, it was the enviable gold that attracted the barbarian invasions south of the Danube, especially after Justin II refused to buy off his enemies. Unfortunately, when the Persian border was threatened by other barbarians, the Byzantine armies were transferred to Asia Minor to keep the empire's borders from being amputated. This left the Balkan frontiers with less military protection, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the Avars. They took advantage of the situation and invaded across the Danube in 574. They achieved two major victories over General Tiberius (the future emperor of Constantinople), who then agreed to renew the customary tribute payments. The general's defeat meant the imperial border was now vulnerable; indeed, it proved to be penetrable and subject to change. In 582 the Avars conquered Sirmium (Mitrovitza), and two years later, Singidunum (Belgrade), the most outstanding of the Roman bastions on the northern Balkan line. This deprived the Byzantines of control of the Pannonian borders and broke the military dam that had held back the barbarians; the inundation was now irreversible. Fighting to regain whatever control he could, General Priscus led the Byzantine armies in three victories against the Avar-Slav coalition and re-took Viminacium (Kostolac). In 600 he forced the Avars to recognize the Danubian line as the inviolable border of the empire.

Maurice (r. 582–602) was the first emperor of Constantinople to understand how vulnerable the Byzantine frontiers really were. They were now ceaselessly under attack by the barbarian hordes. His first priority was to re-establish the old northern borders adjacent to the Danubian natural line of defense; he manned them with highly mobile troops that could quickly

respond to distant emergencies. But lack of money, followed by his assassination at the hands of his own military, left the Byzantine frontiers wide open to the barbarian invasions. The armies that were stationed to secure those lines mutinied. This led to the election of their commander, Phocas, as emperor (r. 602–610); his priority was to destroy his personal, internal enemies. The Avars and Slavs took advantage of this imperial crisis and, by invading Illyria and Dalmatia, created their own borders. The arrival of the Cumans and Patzinaks in Dacia triggered new invasions as far as south as Macedonia. These new invaders had total contempt for any borders and so returned to the northern Danube where they had earlier established family-based camps. “Living alongside the territories of the Byzantine Empire, they treated them as their own and plundered them at will and with complete license.”⁷¹

Bulgars used the Slavic tribes to violate the Byzantine borders and headed toward Constantinople in 710. Together they raided southward, deep into Macedonia and Greece, exhausting the imperial military power and draining the treasury of Constantinople. Their rapacious persistence paid off, and soon the borders of Bulgaria under Khan Krum (r. 803–814) extended from Adrianople, south of Sofia, Niss, and the Iron Gates of the Danube, and northeast beyond the Bug River. Czar Simeon I (r. 893–927) carried out relentless campaigns of conquest in Epirus, Macedonia, and Thracia, and so the First Bulgarian Empire covered many of the Byzantine lands on the Balkan map, reaching its zenith.

The rise of the distant Kievan Rus was felt when they extended their territory against the Bulgars who subsequently moved their capital from Pliska to Preslav. The Kievan occupation of eastern Bulgaria and Dobrudja in 968, in which they established their new capital Pereyaslavets/little Preslav (near Tulcea Romania), was a clear case of dismemberment and annexation of Byzantine lands. After a Russian fleet unsuccessfully attacked Constantinople in 941, the Kievan Prince Sviatoslav used the Pechenegs in his pillaging mission and captured Philippopolis where he impaled 20,000 captives. This prompted a retaliatory campaign led by Emperor John I (r. 969–976). He drove the Russian invaders out Bulgaria and enthroned Prince Boris II (a former guest of Constantinople) as czar/monarch. When its eastern territories were incorporated into the Byzantine Empire in 971, the First Bulgarian Empire symbolically ended.

John inflicted such a defeat on the Russians that all of the lands that had been lost were recaptured. But when Boris was mistakenly murdered by his own military, the emperor found himself facing a Bulgarian uprising led by Samuil/Samuel and his three brothers. They invaded Thracian and Greek provinces with the intention of making them into Bulgarian lands. Meanwhile, Emperor John was poisoned by his own people, and his nephew Basil

II (r. 976–1025) succeeded him. Samuil (whose brothers were killed either by him or in battle) had been elected czar of the Bulgarians; he extended his conquests into Serbian, Macedonian, and Croatian lands, and the major part of the northwestern region of the Balkans became part of his empire. Thus the Byzantine borders were again dramatically redrawn and reduced.

The conquest of these lands was by far the greatest accomplishment of the Bulgars, who by 1003 were so busy battling the Magyars, the new settlers of the Pannonia, that they hardly noticed the military activity of Basil II. He persisted in recapturing Byzantine regions in the south. By 1006 his army had crushed the Bulgars near Thessaloniki and advanced north into the Bulgarian heartland, inflicting gruesome punishments on the populace along the way. Finally, in 1014 the Byzantines resoundingly defeated the Bulgars in the Battle of Kleidion where countless Bulgars were massacred; only fifteen thousand were spared, but they were blinded and allowed to return to their lands led by a few of their comrades who had been blinded in one eye only. When he saw the mutilated soldiers, Emperor Samuil suffered a heart attack and died. Meanwhile, Basil came to be referred to as the “Bulgar-Slayer” and continued to subdue any residual Bulgar resistance until 1018, when the defunct Bulgarian Empire became a Byzantine *theme*/province. Eventually, through diplomacy Alexius I (r. 1081–1118) was able to make use of Cuman military might and destroyed the Pecheneg invaders, who by 1091 had reached Constantinople; they then ravaged Thracia and other southern provinces. Once both barbarian groups had left Bulgaria, he restored the Danubian frontier of the empire. This was a rare accomplishment in itself.

Vlastimir I (r. 825–850), who founded the first Serbian homeland, had three sons who defended their borders against Bulgar invasion. But the older son took over the domains of the younger brothers whom he handed over to the Bulgarian khan, Boris, as a pledge for keeping peace and maintaining the new Serbian borders. A tug of war between the Bulgars and the Byzantines over the numerous factions generated by Serbian rule resulted in Byzantine hegemony over the entire Slavic area. The restless Serbs kept fighting the Byzantines and other foreign groups who sought to dominate them, and gradually expanded their borders at the expense of the Byzantine Empire. Duke Stefan Nemanja (r. 1168–1196) took full advantage of Emperor Manuel I's wars against the Hungarians and occupied the Morava Valley, raided Belgrad, Niss, and Sophia, conquered Zeta (Montenegro) and Kosovo, and entered western Bulgaria. In spite of his humble surrender to Emanuel in 1172, he unified the Serbs and extended the borders of their region outward from Lesser Rascia (between Dalmatia and upper Moesia). Thus, by force of arms Stefan shaped the identity of the Serbian nation. His

chain of conquests was halted in 1191 when he was defeated in South Moravia by a Byzantine army led by Emperor Isaac II. Occupying troops ravaged the Serbian holdings, but could not win in a guerilla war; a peace accord was reached on the basis of a compromise over land between Isaac and Stefan. It was, however, sealed by the marriage of their respective niece and son. Nemanja agreed not to ally himself with the Bulgars and kept Albania, Kosovo, and Zeta. After repelling a Hungarian invasion in 1193, he retained the northern territories and Rascia. Three years later, though, he abdicated and retired as a monk. His two sons divided the nation until the third, Sava, reunited it. Eventually, Stefan I sought papal recognition and was crowned the first Serbian king in 1217. However, by then the Byzantine Empire was providing a much needed wedge between Bulgaria and Serbia—in essence, preventing their alliance.

The most egregious violators of European borders in the Middle Age were the Magyars and Hungarians. Defeated by the Bulgars in 889 and forced by the Pechenegs to settle in the Pannonian flatlands, this migratory tribe could not be confined within any definite boundaries. Their predatory instinct led them to cross one border after another as they invaded the Moravians in 902, and five years later defeated the Bavarians, thus entering the gateway to Central Europe. These ferocious raiders defeated the armies of Alemanni, Burgundians, Franks, Lombards, and Saxons. They even attempted to storm Venice, and in frustration, sacked or reduced to ashes many Italian cities like Pavia and Verona, while also plundering villages and towns in the vicinity of Naples and Rome. Their movements westward brought them to the English Channel and to Denmark. By 924 they had ravaged what is today France and almost reached Spain. For nine years they collected tribute from Henry I of Germany, who was buying time to build his army. He ultimately pulverized the Magyar horde. Another Magyar horde attacked Constantinople in 934 and devastated Macedonia and Thessaly. For the next thirty-five years, these people terrorized the Byzantine Empire and the rest of Europe with their repeated assaults. In 955 at Lechfeld, Otto I (r. 936–973) inflicted a military defeat and stopped further incursions by the Magyars into the West; another defeat at Arcadiopolis in 970 forced them back within the Pannonian borders. After these incidents, Bavaria and Austria were able to continue their existence without fear of an invasion by rapacious neighbors.

In spite of their successful raids all across Europe, the Magyars had difficulty crossing even a few miles into Transylvania. There were three reasons for this: first, if they invaded the area they would be moving eastward toward Asia, and away from the readily available, rich plunder of civilized Europe; second, traversing the Carpathian Mountains would require them to work,

and even though it would mean access to gold and silver, extracting those from the mines was not what a nomad on his horse wanted to do; and third, at that time Transylvania was divided into powerful Daco-Roman *voivodates/dukedoms*. These would have been extremely challenging to conquer because of their mountain locations and because of the military enforcements incoming from the mega tribes of Avars, Cumans, and Pechenegs, all of whom were feared by the Hungarians.² According to *Gesta Hungarorum*,³ when the Magyars (Mogerii) settled on the Tisza (Tyscia) River they found Slavs (Sclavi), Bulgarians (Bulgarii), Vlachs (Blachii), and the shepherds of the Romans (*pastores Romanorum*). The last two of these peoples were the unmistakable Vlachian inhabitants of the Pannonian and Transylvanian lands—a society that possessed a solid Daco-Roman historic background, the only ethnic group who spoke a Latin dialect.

The first expedition of Magyars encountered the “tribal territories” of the voivodates of Glad in the Banat region, the Menumorut north of Banat in the Bihar/Crisana basin, and, to the east, the central land of Gelu, *dux Blacorum* (leader of the Vlachs) as it is referred to in *Gesta Ungarorum*. The same Hungarian document reported that when Arpad used force to settle his Magyars in Transylvania, he was confronted at the line of the Temes/Timis River by Voievode Glad, leading a great army of Bulgarians, Cumans, and Vlachs. Another historical source, *The Chronicle of Nestor*, written in Kiev before the twelfth century, clearly stated that the Voloh/Vlach army of Transylvania had no Hungarian soldiers when it fought the Bulgars in 1210.⁴ King Geza I (r. 1074–1077) encouraged western Europeans known as Saxons and Szeklers to settle in Transylvania, thus indirectly colonized it with Catholics who would depend on his benevolence. Generally, they were wandering people and penniless misfits who did not belong to any state; they found a refuge in Transylvania where the Hungarian kings endowed them with land that had never belonged to Hungary. When the Teutonic Knights returned defeated from the Holy Wars in Palestine, they settled in Transylvania where they founded the city of Brasov and built Bran Castle in the Fagaras Mountains. All these newcomers drew arbitrary borders in this area that was known as the “land of the Vlachs.” South of Transylvania was Wallachia with the vast Vlasia Forest and grain basket area of Vlasca stretching along the Danube densely populated by Vlachs; Via Wallachien-sis was a well known commercial route connecting Danubian trade with Lvov in Poland.

More than one million Vlachs/Wallachians populated Transylvania and Wallachia before the arrival of the Hungarians. The Hungarians came to control seven counties in Transylvania, two of which were ruled independently by the Saxons and Sekelys. In 1222 they forced the powerless King Andras II

to award them the Golden Bull. Thus Hungarian authority came to be merely symbolic in that area. Its demographics were further complicated by:

the presence of a fourth people, the *Wlachs* (Wallachians). The earliest written records of their existence in Erdély date from 1210 and 1222. The Wlachs came from the Balkan Peninsula as semi-nomadic shepherd folk. In the ensuing centuries, their leisurely and voluntary immigration was transformed into wholesale flight from Tartar attacks, Turkish invasions and the oppression of their own Phanariote rulers. Incidentally, these Tartar and Turkish wars, while increasing the number of Wallachians (later called Rumanians) in Transylvania, decimated the indigenous Hungarian population of the country.⁵

This highly contestable and historically inaccurate explanation is typical of how the Hungarians dismissed any Romanian claim to legitimate control of Transylvania. In the capital of Buda between the years 904 and 1500, more than ninety voievodes were formally approved by the Hungarian kings to govern Transylvania. In fact, they were local warlords and clan leaders (*maiores terrae*) who originated from different parts of Transylvania and had accepted Hungarian suzerainty in the hope of gaining protection from barbarian and Ottoman invasions. Most of them were independent rulers and some were involved in the internal affairs of Hungary, such as Mihaly Szilagy.⁶ Furthermore, although Hungarians take credit for bringing Christianity to Transylvania, this religion was in fact a presence in the Carpathian Mountains before the arrival of the Magyars and prior to the tenth century, with monastic establishments on the Mures River at Morisena (near today's Cenad) and Salaj in the Crisana region.

Militarily, when the Magyars used force to take over still more Transylvanian land, they were met with force: Hungarian King Andras was coerced by the Saxons to grant them financial and judicial autonomy, and this nearly ended Hungarian control of Transylvania.⁷ Yet, the Hungarians persistently crossed other borders, assuming ownership of other lands. And, they infringed on the borders of independent Croatia, which in the mid 1060s included Bosnia, Slavonia, and a strip of the Damatian coast. After King Laszlo I occupied Croatia in 1091 and declared himself a Croatian king, territorial matters that involved Pope Urban II led to the countries concerned to enter the *Pacta Conventa* in 1102 and so form a union of independent states. Displeased with this agreement, the next Hungarian king Coloman occupied Biograd (a vital sea port for continental Hungary), where he crowned himself ruler; he considered Dalmatia and Slavonia part of his kingdom as well. However, the political deck had been shuffled just as it had in Transylvania: separate states shared a common king recognized by the local independent rulers who in turn were approved by the Hungarian monarch who demanded their loyalty. The king

was represented by a *ban* in Croatia and a voievode in Transylvania, the only Hungarian administrator elected from rank of barons who were in charge of some estates; he was formally the chief judge and military commander. This was part of the Hungarian strategy applied all over Eastern Europe—to claim lands and imaginary borders by assuming hegemony backed by military strikes. Later, it was the basis upon which these “loyal principalities” were incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When the last Comnenus emperors strangled each other in fighting over the Byzantine throne, King Bela III (r. 1172–1196), who had taken an oath in Constantinople never to attack the Byzantine Empire (indeed, he helped Emperor Manuel I to campaign against Hungary), now saw an opportunity to extend the Hungarian borders south of the Danube. He invaded Moesia and allied with the Serbs to destroy Niss and Serdica. Eventually, he reasoned with his son-in-law Emperor Isaac II and re-focused his aggression on the Bulgarians, without any territorial gains.

Despite a roller-coaster of incidents and wars between Byzantines, Hungarians and Venetians, all of whom badly wanted possession of the Dalmatian coast, Southern Croatia-Dalmatia, and Bosnia, these lands remained relatively free. For the most part they were “royal cities” and they continued to be self-governing, with their borders remaining relatively unchanged. A large “Serbian” population within Bosnia was actually composed of Vlachs from northern Albania and Montenegro, who always maintained their independent status. Traditionally shepherds of the Balkans, they were strong militarily, exemplified by their killing of Prince David (brother of Czar Samuil) who shortly ruled regions of Macedonia and Thessaly. When Bulgars, Serbs, and Hungarians became too possessive as far as land was concerned, all these people asked the Byzantine Empire for protection until the Golden Horde terminated the other invadatory powers in the region. But the Hungarians made a spectacular comeback, and Louis the Great (r. 1342–1382) considered himself the king of Hungary, Poland, Dalmatia, Croatia, Rama, Serbia, Galicia, Sicily, and Jerusalem. He also ruled part of Bulgaria, and Moldavia and Wallachia were his vassal principedoms—and also his enemies. The noble pretext for the Hungarian kings’ determination to occupy the neighboring countries was to convert them to Catholicism and establish a common front against Ottoman expansion into Eastern Europe.

In the eastern lands towards the area of the Volga River, the well-established Khazars desperately defended their borders against the restless Bulgars, nomadic Slavs, and countless other wandering tribes. Their leaders used titles that sounded good to them, but had little real meaning, such as *beg*, *khan*, *qugan*, and *czar*. Plundering raids, vast population migrations, and ignorance of geographic boundaries and their meaning were all factors

in the development of the social consciousness of the tribes that roamed the vast lands of what is today Ukraine, a name that translates as “borderland.” In this land, with only a few unmapped commercial roads and trade posts, the Grand Prince of Kiev, Vladimir I (r. 980–1015), who murdered his other brothers, took the matter of borders very seriously. He was aware that, unless these tribes were subdued, there would be no kingdom to rule. He spared no military and diplomatic effort, and even kidnapped his future pagan wife, Rogneta (after killing her father because he had rejected his marriage proposal) and married many others in order to create the state of the Kievan Rus. Because the Pechenegs continued to invade his territory, Vladimir had fortifications constructed which duplicated the Roman defense system; they encircled Kiev with a radius of more than 100 miles. From this base of operations, he conducted successful campaigns in Galicia, occupied land between Poland and Lithuania, and extended his borders into Volga Bulgaria.

Poland was a rapidly expanding, competitive country, one that grew to considerable size after its short lived occupation of Bohemia, Lusatia, Meissen Moravia, part of Ruthenia, and even its capture of Kiev (1018). The kingdom became a powerful and influential empire until the children of King Boleslaw (r. 992–1025) drew numerous lines of demarcation between their principalities, and it took the Piast dynasty to transform the kingdom of Poland into an imperial state and extend its borders into Eastern Europe. Lithuania was a constant source of irritation to the Kievan Rus and for good reason: by the fourteenth century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania occupied vast territories of what are today Belarus, Ukraine, sections of Poland, European Russia (up to the Duchy of Moscow), and Transnistria of Moldavia. Its area stretched from the Baltic to the Black seas, making it the largest state in medieval Europe. Eventually a dynastic union caused Poland and Lithuania to be melded into one empire.

South of the Danube, the Byzantine Empire subordinated an array of nations and ethnic groups. Perhaps the most poignant examples of this were the Macedonians and Vlachs. Macedonia, at its zenith in ancient times, became first a Roman and then a Byzantine province, the latter when its borders were shifted to an area north of the Aegean Sea. The crusaders of the Latin Empire divided Macedonia, and it was again divided by Serbs and Bulgars. Its borders and its name were then erased under Ottoman occupation. As portions of their land were assimilated by their greedy neighbors, Macedonians came to be mistakenly known as Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs, and Thracians. But the situation was different with the Vlachs⁸, a numerous and distinctive group of people who recognized no borders and lived all over the Balkan Peninsula; they were often mistaken for other ethnicities until, in 1186, an incident took place. It had unforeseeable major historical implica-

tions and put them solidly on the map. It began when two Vlachian brothers had an audience with Emperor Isaac II and “request[ed] that they be recruited in the Roman army and be awarded by imperial prescript a certain estate situated in the vicinity of Mount Haimos, which would provide them with a little revenue.”⁹ They asked the emperor for official recognition of their Vlachian land; in exchange they were willing to enroll in the Byzantine army. When their request was denied, the Vlachian brothers “spat out heated words, hinting at rebellion,” and “Asan, the more insolent and savage of two, was struck across the face and rebuked for his impudence”¹⁰ by a high dignitary. The humiliated brothers kept their word and a successful rebellion followed in which they counted heavily on military help from the Cumans and Vlachs living north of the Danube.¹¹

Their contemporary, historian Niketas, hardly mentioned the names of the Bulgars when he described these events. But he did clearly state that “the Vlachs were afflicted with the disease of open rebellion” and “the emperor marched out against them”¹² in the spring of 1186—not against the Bulgarians. He also referred to the Cumans as “auxiliaries,” not the main fighters in this conflict. Moreover, four years later General Constantine Aspietes, who “was strongly exhorted to pursue the war against the Vlachs,” instead thought it better “to pay them their annual wages.”¹³ Indeed, their leader and future King “Ioannitsa marched out with a large and mighty force,” aiming to destroy many Byzantine cities, including Adrianople (Edirne) and Didymoteichon (Dimetoka); intending to “cause the Romans [Byzantines] to withdraw from Thrace, he could leave the land fit to be inhabited only by wild beasts.”¹⁴ What Ioannitsa, the youngest and most accomplished brother of the Asans, wanted was to establish a Greater Wallachia in Moesia and Thessaly, both of which were densely populated by Vlachs.

When the crusaders created a Latin Empire around his kingdom, Ioannitsa urged Pope Innocent to “write to the Latins, to keep away from my empire, and, if they do, my empire will not harm them; but let them not set it at little worth. If they make an attempt against my empire and set it at little worth, and some of them get killed, do not your Holiness suspect my empire because it will not be my fault.”¹⁵ By planting the seeds of terror, he hoped to keep the Romans (Byzantines) and the Latins (crusaders) from interfering with his plans. His assassination in 1207 ended those plans. However, thirty years later Pope Gregory IX remembered Ioannitsa as *Dominus Blachorum et Bulgarorum*/Lord of the Vlachs and Bulgars, a true challenger of borders. If there was ever a need to draw a border in the Balkans, it was to separate the Bulgars from the Vlachs, the masters of the Danubian lands. Regardless of any boundaries, the Vlach shepherds traveled with their herds of animals between distant lands (like Dobroudja and Pannonia) that they had owned since

the Dacian Empire. But landmarks began to rapidly change due to another invasion that no borders could stop.

The arrival of the Golden Horde made borders meaningless as far as the people of the Balkans being able to confront an unstoppable military power. Determined to rebuild Attila's empire and to re-conquer European lands, the Tartar hordes dismembered Volga Bulgaria in 1236 and destroyed the Kievan and Russian states. In 1240–1241 they descended on Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria. The Mongolians defeated every army that was sent to repel them and inflicted one calamity after another upon the occupied nations, reducing cities to ruins and displaying every known form of human cruelty. As they erased the borders of Eastern European countries all the way from Russia to Austria and the Balkan Peninsula, the Mongolian invasion coined the term "world war," perversely illustrating a kind of barbarian magnificence by the sheer terror and death that it caused.

Ironically, the Hungarians, who were always proud to claim their heritage from Attila, were hardest hit by the Tartars. They later blamed their apocalyptic defeat on Cuman desertion from the Hungarian army. But, in fact, in this circumstance a minor incident also had enormous consequences. It began when the Hungarians captured an enemy who turned out to be a Cuman warrior. He had previously been captured by the invading Tartars who forced him into the ranks of the hordes. Denouncing the act as a case of treason, King Bela IV (r. 1235–1270) ordered his soldiers to massacre the Cuman king and his court, all of whom were his guests. The outraged and humiliated Cumans evacuated the area, leaving a trail of destruction behind them. The departure of their single ally further weakened Hungarian border to barbarian attacks, and the Golden Horde quickly reached the city of Pest on the Danube. The Tartars simulated a retreat only to ambush the Hungarian army and utterly destroy it. King Bela "heroically" escaped the slaughter with a small band of members of his court, while the only heroic deed left for the decimated Hungarians was to try to break the ice on the Danube so the Tartars could not cross into their capital. Those who escaped slaughter at the hands of the Golden Horde took refuge east of Tisza or in the convenient Mures River valley and then entered Transylvania. What saved the remaining Hungarians and their country from being wiped out entirely was yet another accident of history, the death of the Mongol emperor. It prompted Batu Khan to lead his Tartars back to Asia in hope of seizing the vacant throne of his uncle. This saved Vienna from siege, but before retreating from Europe, the Mongolians slaughtered all the captured Hungarians so that the prisoners would not slow the speedy retreat of the Golden Horde.

King Bela, now cast out of his homeland, looked abroad for shelter. The treasury he carried with him was confiscated by Duke Frederick of Austria,

who also forced the king to hand over three of his border areas. Subsequent to this, Bela fled to Dalmatia. When the humiliated and penniless king returned to his devastated and thoroughly depopulated Hungary, he begged any and all of the barbarians, especially the numerous and powerful Cumans, to return and help re-build the country. These events are most likely the reason that Bela, who conducted a prolonged struggle for power (mostly against his father and his son Stephen V) in his own country, called himself *rex Cumaniae* (King of Cumania).¹⁶ Perhaps his adoption of this high-flown Cumanian title can be rationalized because he once governed Transylvania and could justify the extension of the Hungarian border into the Wallachian land that soon was to be evacuated by the Cumans.

Indeed, the ravaged continent had not witnessed destruction on such a scale since Attila the Hun's invasion five centuries earlier. There was only one good thing about the incursion of the Golden Horde into Europe—it eliminated the military power of the Magyars and caused them to stop violating European borders. Still, every barbarian invasion created chaos among the nations of the Balkans and erased the borders between them. The Tartars still ruled supreme in the vast lands surrounding Kiev and Moscow, forcing each Russian czar to depend on their benevolence to extend his domain. Alexander Nevsky (r. 1236–1263) and his son Daniel I (r. 1283–1303) were cases in point. The medieval state of the Kievan Rus and Grand Duchy of Moscow bordered what are today Finland, the Ural Mountains, and the Sea of Azov, but the Tartars continued to raid the Russian lands and impose conditions of vassalage on all the principalities there. It took Ivan III the Great (r. 1462–1505) to defeat them and triple the size of his czardom. Since he considered himself a Byzantine revivalist, he adopted the double-headed eagle as the Russian coat of arms. Still, the kingdoms of Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden kept their borders in check and prevented the Russians from moving westward into Central Europe.

With its military might revived due to the fact that it had adopted a multitude of barbarian tribes, Hungary established a kind of hegemony in the Romanian kingdom of Wallachia. Its prince, Basarab I (r. 1310–1352), felt it his right to extend his border into the Severin-Banat area and other former Dacian lands now under the rule of King Charles I of Hungary. The angry king rejected Basarab's offer of money to buy the province and led a punitive expedition into Wallachia, only to be ambushed at the gorges of Posada and forced to retreat. His son, King Louis I, continued to extend the eastern border of the nation and spread Catholicism into the Maramures area (another former Dacian land) before the powerful Lithuanian and Ottoman Empires occupied it. He invaded the Romanian principalities and in 1344 established a system of vassalage in Moldavia and Wallachia; he trusted Duke Dragos I to rule

Moldavia on behalf of the Hungarian crown, provided that he would fight against the Tartars. Taking the title *domnitor* (from the Latin *dominus* for lord or despot) in 1353, Dragos united the Moldavians into a centralized nation. His successor Bogdan I rejected Hungarian patronage, and from 1359 until 1365 ruled an independent state. Petru I (r. 1375–1391) extended the Moldavian borders from the Carpathians to the Dniester River and to the shore of the Black Sea. Mircea the Elder (r. 1386–1418) shifted the Wallachian border still farther toward the shore of the Black Sea, thereby incorporating Dobrudja and achieving the most significant land extension in the history of his country. He accomplished this by supporting Prince Musa's candidacy for the Ottoman throne. The free principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, with a population of one million, spoke the same basic language that Romanians speak today, illustrating the principle that a common language defines the border and nationality of a country.

South of the Danubian line, Stefan Dusan IV, who reigned as king from 1331–1346 and emperor from 1346–1355, learned one thing from his seven years of living in Constantinople: it was better to rule an empire than a kingdom. He unsuccessfully fought the Hungarians to whom he was forced to surrender two counties in exchange for peace. He had the Bulgarians safely on his side (he married the sister of the Bulgarian emperor) and took advantage of the civil war (1341–1347) between emperors John V and John VI when the Serbians crossed deep into the Byzantine lands and occupied most of western Balkans and northern Greece. In doing this, he relied heavily on the German mercenaries (also his personal guard) to keep the Serbian adversaries at bay; the timing of the plague epidemic also proved to be fortuitous as far as his efforts at border expansion were concerned. In 1346 Dusan was crowned emperor in Skopje, Macedonia; he then bluntly declared himself "Emperor of the Serbs, Greeks, Bulgars, and Albanians." His daring and successful campaigns built the Serbian Empire (1346–1371), with its borders on the shores of the Adriatic Sea, the Gulf of Corinth, and the banks of the Danube, Drina, Nestos, and Sava rivers. However, the establishment of that empire had a significant side effect: the Turks, who had been commissioned to defend the Byzantines from the Serbians, now had free access to the Balkans. In other words, the land hungry Serbs had opened the doors to even hungrier predators, the Turks, now allies of Constantinople. Realizing the enormity of this error, Emperor Dusan was determined to evict the Mohammedans from the Balkan Peninsula. However, the need to deal with repeated Hungarian invasions and his premature death in 1355 from an act of poisoning proved how quickly one can turn from victor into victim.

His incompetent son Stefan Uros V (r. 1355–1371) lost Dubrovnik in 1358, and it formally became a part of the Croat-Hungarian Kingdom; this pros-

perous maritime city, a sort of state within a state, was called Republica Ragusina. A civil war between members of the Uros family and the state's co-ruler, Prince Vukasin, dismembered the former Serbian Empire, and "Emperor" Uros died childless in 1371. That same year the Ottomans defeated a Serbian army (which included Bulgar units) of seventy thousand in the Maritsa Valley and put an end to the short-lived Serbian Empire. The latter had lost most of its aristocracy (including Prince Vukasin) in that battle. It was the first and last time that Balkan Christians were in a position to eliminate the Turkish peril from the Balkans. But, instead of this, Eastern Macedonia became subordinate to the Turks, and the Islamic Empire continued to expand so as to encompass Bulgaria and extend as far as the main borders of Bosnia and Serbia.

The Battle of Kosovo (1389) decided the fate of the Serbians. Despot Lazar led a coalition of Serbs, Albanians, Bosnians, Bulgarian, Magyars, and Croatian contingents against the numerically superior Ottoman army; the odds in this horrific fight swung back and forth until Duke Brankovich, who had twelve thousand men including Magyars, gave up the fight and fled. Legend has it that the duke believed Sultan Murat I would reward him for his treachery with the crown of Serbia. When the battle was over, the tragic results were apparent in the blood-soaked field of Kosovo: Lazar and Sultan Murad I had been killed, and the remaining Serbian nobility was wiped out. Serbian military power would never rise again, and the Bulgarians lost all hope of regaining independence, given that their capital of Turnovo was now occupied by the Turks. A few hours on the battlefield had changed the Balkan borders forever.

Still, the Turks were not invincible. They could not cross any border at will without paying a price in blood. The Battle of Rovine in 1395 proved this when an invading army of forty thousand allied Turks and Serbs led by Sultan Bayazid I was defeated in Wallachia by Prince Mircea the Elder, who commanded only ten thousand Romanians. As adversarial cavalry squadrons prepared for another strike and packs of foot warriors pursued and hacked at each other, the fierce battle ended with heavy casualties on both sides. Prince Marko, who had been the first Serbian knight to fight the Turks but was now their ally, was killed in the battle; he later was greatly idolized by the Bulgarians, Macedonians, and Serbians for his enormous physical strength and his labors as the protector of Christians. The Serbian Despot Dragas (also a former anti-Ottoman fighter) likewise died fighting against the Wallachians. By aiding the Turks, the Serbs had hoped to keep the borders of Serbia free, but their heroic deaths had the opposite effect: Wallachia remained independent.

Encouraged by Wallachia's military success, the western rulers who saw the Ottomans encroaching upon their borders decided to organize the first

Balkan crusade and force the Muslims out of the peninsula. A grand military plan was put in motion with an anti-Muslim coalition that included the French, Hungarians, knights Hospitaller, and Wallachians. Smaller numbers of soldiers were provided by Bohemian, Bulgarian, Burgundian, Dutch, Bohemian, Italian, Polish, Scottish, Spanish, and Swiss detachments. As many as fifty thousand Christian troops were supported by the Genovese and Venetian fleet; they confronted some sixty thousand Turks and their Serbian allies. Encouraged by the Turkish surrender at the fortress of Oryahovo/Rahova where French knights massacred their captives, the crusaders marched on to meet the armies of Sultan Bayezid I and his ally, Serbian Prince Lazarevich. Though officially under the command of Hungarian King Sigismund, each ethnic corps of the anti-Ottoman coalition obeyed the command of its own leader. Deluded by a false sense of security, they all celebrated the Oryahovo “victory” for two weeks, giving the sultan enough time to assemble his marching troops. It was an error that would later prove regrettable—in blood.

The epic crusade took place near the fortress of Nicopolis on the Danube in September 1396. Ignoring valuable advice from Prince Mircea, who had recently defeated the Turks and so was aware of their devious tactics, the western knights were focused on being the first to attack so they wouldn't have to share the spoils of their victory with others. With their horses galloping at full speed, colorful standards flying high and swords glittering in sun, the chivalrous French charged uphill straight into a military disaster. The outlook was so bleak that Sigismund's half-hearted attempt to rescue them convinced Prince Mircea to withdraw his Wallachians; the Transylvanians, who like the Wallachians were reluctant vassals of the Hungarians, followed them. In the fog of battle with no leader firmly in command, the heavily armored knights now fighting on foot performed individual heroics to no avail: in their repeated and deadly charges, the Ottoman cavalry of thousands hacked them to bits. Some three hundred crusaders died plunging off the steep hill; many others met a heroic death on the battlefields, and those who managed to escape drowned in the Danube under the weight of their armor. From the top of the hill, Sultan Bayezid the Thunderbolt observed it all. His battle plan was being successfully carried out by his troops who were going for the final kill. Since another assault would have been pointless, King Sigismund and the Grand Master of the Hospitallers fled and managed to escape the hellish battle by using a fisherman's boat to reach a Venetian ship.¹⁷

The Hungarian army, deserted by its king, ran away or surrendered, while twenty thousand crusaders died fighting. When the battle was over, at least three thousand prisoners had been butchered in retaliation for the Oryahovo massacre of the Turkish captives. The most notable of the Hungarian captives were spared so they might be offered in exchange for a substantial ransom.

In a matter of hours, Hungary's borders were accessible and defenseless, without a king or an army. What saved the country was the fact that Bayezid suffered an attack of gout that forced him to cease his aggressive campaign and seek medical care. At Nicopolis he finally settled the long dispute with Sigismund concerning hegemony over the Danubian line and also over Serbia and Wallachia. In the end, it would go to the Turks, not the Hungarians. The costly crusade amounted to nothing, except that it precipitated the collapse of the Bulgarian and Serbian states and brought about their annexation. The Turks used the momentum of their victory to cross the rivers of Morava and Drina and occupied part of Bosnia, extending the Ottoman Empire into the Orthodox lands. But their easiest effort at expansion was in Epirus and Thessaly. The Greek bishop of Phocis, who behaved with servility so as to ensure Bayezid's benevolence, invited him to hunt in those provinces; the cunning bishop hoped to use the sultan's presence to enhance his authority and eliminate Latin and Greek rivals for his ecumenical post. But this "cordial" invitation backfired:

Bayezid responded to the invitation, and by the simple fact of his presence at the head of a Turkish army, the ancient districts of Doris, Locris and Phocis went, not to the Bishop, but to the sultan. Bayezid now returned to set siege to Constantinople, leaving the easy task of overrunning Livadia and the Morea to the care of two of his generals—Everenos and Yakoub. With the exception of Athens and Modon, which continued for a while to belong to the Latins, both districts passed into the hands of the Ottomans in 1397, and thousands of Greeks were carried into slavery to Asia. Turkish settlements were planted everywhere to make up for the depopulation of the land.¹⁸

From then on, the Turkish process of annexation of the Balkan borders seemed unstoppable. However, the astonishing military campaigns of John Hunyadi between 1441 and 1443 saved the Serbian borders, and then those of Wallachia, from Ottoman invasion. The result was that his trusted Petru II was installed on the throne of Moldavia. He succeeded in regaining the freedom of Niss, Pirot, and Sofia, and put an end to Ottoman domination of Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Herzegovina. Sultan Murad II was willing to grant the independence of Serbia and Wallachia in exchange for certain occupied Ottoman lands, but Polish King Ladislaus Jagelo ignored a treaty that had already been signed and decided instead to fight it out. Clearly, the chain of Hunyadi's victories inspired confidence in those Balkan nations that now sought to free themselves from the yoke of Turkish oppression. This trend coincided with Pope Eugene IV's intention of extending Catholicism into the Balkan Peninsula. Along with the large number of Hungarian, Polish, Transylvanian, and Wallachian troops he had at his disposal, King Jagelo

succeeded in recruiting units of Bohemians, Bosnians, Croats, Czechs, Lithuanians, Moldavians, Ruthenians, and Bulgars. They all joined the march of thirty thousand crusaders eager to battle the Turks. Sultan Murad moved an army of forty thousand from Anatolia, meeting up with another of twenty thousand from Rumelia at the fortress of Varna in November 1444. Hunyadi and his Wallachian cavalry corps (which also included Moldavians) achieved an initial victory, reached the Turkish camp, and then retreated to unload their booty and regroup.

The inexperienced twenty-one year-old King Jagelo, already entrusted with playing a starring role, considered it his turn to celebrate a victory and valiantly charged with five hundred Polish knights against the now well positioned ten thousand Janissaries. The latter surrounded their attackers, and the situation took its own unpredictable turn when, in the true spirit of knighthood, Jagelo decided to challenge Murad to a duel. Instead he was hacked to bits by the sultan's guard and then beheaded. A predictable panic spread among the Christian troops, and the Ottomans took full advantage of it, pursuing and butchering at least ten thousand of them. Vainly Hunyadi returned with his army corps and tried to wrest victory from the jaws of defeat, but the battle was lost. He "fled in despair with the wreck of the troops that he had personally commanded, and with the Wallachians who collected round him."¹⁹ Hunyadi himself gave up the fight; "the Hungarian rear-guard, abandoned by their commanders, was attacked by the Turks the next morning and massacred almost to a man. Besides the Hungarian King, Cardinal Julian, the author of the breach of the treaty and the cause of this calamitous campaign, perished at Varna beneath the Turkish scimitar, together with Stephen Bahory, and the Bishops of Eilau and Grosswardein."²⁰ Swords, lances, mace, and bows and arrows were still the main weapons used in this battle, but, for the first time, field cannons were employed by both sides as well—a revolutionary shift in fighting technique that would from this point forward change the course of warfare.

The Christian defeat at Varna sealed the doom of Bosnia and Serbia and played a huge role in the future history of the Balkans. While Ottoman armies were busy fighting in the Danubian countries, in the southern Balkan Peninsula the moribund Byzantine Empire was reduced to a patch of land immediately surrounding Constantinople that was ruled by John VIII (r. 1425–1448). It also included the distant Morea (Peloponnesus Peninsula) which was divided between the emperor's three brothers. One of them, Despot Constantine (the next and last Byzantine emperor), repossessed Athens, Boeotia, Patras, and Thebes; in 1444, he urged the Vlachs from the Pindos Mountains to liberate Thessaly. This amounted to the revival of a territorial conflict that, after Constantine's ascent to the throne, degenerated into a fratricidal fight over

land and a power struggle between the two brothers. They called on the Turks to help support their selfish cause, an action that ended any further question about ownership of the border areas of their principalities. The dual but contradictory alliances led to a fateful journey for the Byzantines.

Disaster followed upon disaster, and another defeat of the Christian armies took place during the Second Battle at Kosovo in 1448. The two-day struggle began with progress for the Hungarians and Wallachians who, led by Hunyadi, reached the main camp of Murat II. But the delay on the part of the Albanian army, which was intercepted by Serbian Despot Brankovich, now a Turkish vassal, altered the outcome of the gruesome battle. Outnumbered two to one, the Christian coalition held until the Hungarian knights either were killed or deserted. When Hunyadi could no longer ignore the obvious outcome and surrendered, the victory of Sultan Mehmed II and his Serbian ally was sealed. The two battles of Kosovo became a symbol of Serbian independence. Over the centuries, a myth developed around this conflict. It was and is today taken to be an event of great national significance²¹ as the Serbian border was opened to the Ottomans and a new ethnicity and religion were imposed on this land of Orthodoxy. This produced a troublesome legacy of destruction, the intensity of which increased with the passage of time.²²

As for the Turks, they found a new leader in the person of Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446 and 1451–1481), a diligent student of the cannon. Willing to pay and equip his army with artillery units, the young sultan in 1453 positioned them around the walls of Constantinople. In its twenty-five hundred-year history, the stubborn Byzantine metropolis had proven impenetrable to sieges from Avars, Bulgars, Goths, Huns, Persians, Turks, and Slavs; it had also survived the crusaders' pillaging. As long as its walls held, there was a clear border around the heart of the Byzantine Empire and its Orthodox Church, from which religious hope flowed into the Eastern lands. By 1453 that border had been reduced to its narrowest limits, defended by fewer than ten thousand men under Emperor Constantine XI (r. 1449–1453). At the end of May that year, they were overwhelmed by relentless cannonades that made breaches in the walls and by the frontal assault of tens of thousands of Turkish soldiers eager to plunder the Queen City. The rest of the Christian world provided the once great Byzantine capital with no assistance. The Black Plague, the military exhaustion of the West, and the Ottoman occupation of the greater part of the Balkans discouraged any rescue initiatives. The hapless Constantinopolitans grew desperate as they became aware of the impending catastrophe. The fall of Nova Roma was an event of Biblical proportions for the Christians and a triumph for the Muslims. For the next forty years, the Ottomans would occupy Bosnia, Serbia, Albania, Croatia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

After the fall of Constantinople, Mehmed II confidently moved a massive army of at least sixty thousand men with three hundred cannons and a fleet of two hundred warships to attack Belgrade in July 1456. If this important border city were captured, the Turkish army planned to invade Hungary and then Central Europe. But they were counter-attacked by Hunyadi's relief forces which smashed the enemy blockade around the city. A Janissary assault caused their annihilation inside the fortress and severely injured the sultan; he fainted and was carried away, creating a mass panic in the Turkish army which was now in chaotic retreat. However, the victory of the Christians was accompanied by a tragic surprise: the plague broke out inside the city and took thousands of lives, including that of John Hunyadi, the ultimate savior of the Hungarian and western borders. The defeat delayed Ottoman expansion north of the Danube. It also put Hunyadi's teenage son, Matthias, on the throne of Hungary and Prince Dracula on the throne of Wallachia. Moreover, it provided hope, as far as fighting the Turks was concerned, to Albania and semi-vassals Moldavia and Wallachia.

In 1461 Prince Dracula refused to pay the traditional tribute to Constantinople and conducted devastating raids into Turkish Bulgaria south of the frozen Danube. He believed that the rest of Europe, whose borders were facing imminent peril from the Ottomans, would follow his example. The next summer he fought an armada that Mehmed II led into Wallachia. While battling this invasion, his cousin Stefan extended the Moldavian border into Danubian Wallachia before the Turks could occupy it. He pulled off the impossible and bravely fought on two fronts while Dracula attempted to convince the pope, Hungarian King Matthias, and other powerful rulers to join his anti-Ottoman fight. Failing to do so, he was taken prisoner and sent to the Hungarian capital. In 1463 he heard from there that the Ottomans had occupied Bosnia.

By 1465 a tug of war had developed over the Wallachian fortress of Chilia between Hungary, Moldavia, the Ottoman Empire, and Poland. King Matthias led his Hungarian army into Moldavia with the intention of incorporating it into his kingdom, only to be wounded three times; he barely managed to escape after a crushing defeat at the hands of Stefan. Since he did not want to see Wallachia occupied by the Ottomans, Matthias released Prince Dracula who, with the assistance of his cousin Stefan, took back his throne for the third time in 1476; that same year, he died fighting a Turkish-sponsored Wallachian prince. His struggle to overtake the areas bordering on the Danube backfired in distant Crimea where the Genovese hired the Tartars to attack Moldavia, while the Turks and their allies of convenience, the Bulgars and Wallachians, rushed to be the first to invade Moldavia. They were defeated in a four-day battle at Vaslui in 1475 when the Wallachians reversed their loyalties and chased the retreating Turks out of their country. Pope Sixtus

IV bestowed the title of *Athleta Christi* on Stefan, nicknamed the Great, who desperately tried to convince the Hungarian and Polish kings and anyone else to continue his fight. Instead, King Matthias stayed with the policy of Laszlo IV, namely, to befriend Transylvania and make it a buffer zone between volatile Moldavia and Wallachia through which the Ottomans could easily proceed and reach the border of Hungary.

No doubt, claiming a border was a goal for any leader. His ambition was then capped when he bestowed an impressive title on himself. To make sure that history would properly record their role in preserving the borders of their Christian domains, some Hungarian kings signed their names beneath important texts with: "By the Grace of God, Apostolic King of Hungary, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Rama, Serbia, Galicia, Lodomeria, Cumania and Bulgaria, Grand Prince of Transylvania, Count of the Szeklers." But, in fact, only King Matthias was even partially worthy of that title as he extended the borders of Hungary by both the power of the sword and by the means of diplomacy into Bohemia, Dalmatia, half of Austria, southeastern Germany, southwestern Poland, and his native Transylvania; also, in 1469 he was crowned king of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Lusatia/Lausitz (a German district north of Moravia). Yet, regardless of what the Hungarian kings accomplished, the Ottomans persisted in occupying one country after another. After the defeat in 1493 at Krbavsko Polje, Croatia lost its best men and with them the hope of prospering again.

In order to limit the number of existing borders between their multi-ethnic Balkan possessions, the Turks named the middle of the peninsula "Rumelia," meaning Land of the Romans. It included mainly those territories of the Vlachian population which were spread over the former Bulgaria, central Greece, Macedonia, and Thracia. Most likely these were non-Vlachian people who spoke a Latin-based language that was also predominantly loaded with Greek and Slavic vocabulary. However, the Turks had difficulty crossing the border of Lesser Albania where Giorgi Kastrioti Skandenberg (r. 1443–1468) continued to fight off invaders and succeeded in maintaining the independence of his country. During John Hunyadi's campaign at Niss in 1443, Skandenberg and a few hundred Albanians defected from the Turkish ranks; for twenty-five years he scored remarkable victories against the Ottomans. He adopted the Byzantine double-headed eagle flag, and his spectacular victories brought him the papal title of *Athleta Christi*. Like Prince Vlad Dracula of Wallachia, Skandenberg bravely fought alone against massive Turkish armies and unsuccessfully tried to involve Pope Pius II and western monarchs in a crusade against the Ottomans.²³ Nothing lasting came out of his efforts, and, after his death, Albania was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire; still, its people continued to try to regain their freedom. Hungary was next in line to succumb to Turkish occupation; this would happen in 1526.

Clearly, creating chaos and terror was the core strength of the barbarian invaders, and it was the main reason for the destabilization and eventual demise of the Byzantine Empire. At work in all of this was a relatively simple calculus: the tribe that killed the most people confiscated the greatest amount of land from its victims. Nevertheless, the border of each state was only as strong as its ruler. When petty squabbles and civil wars erupted, rulers asked for foreign help and established desperate alliances. Because of this, Turkish contingents often controlled parts of countries even before the Ottoman expansion began. Later, apocalyptic battles lasting a few days or sometimes only a few hours determined the destiny of entire nations. Victory in war allowed one nation to take over previous borders and designate new ones. Each conquest came with territorial gains, followed by geopolitical movements that were constantly subject to still more demographic pressure. There were few times of peace in which the borders could be preserved, and these areas were ravaged by unending acts of retribution.

Yet, in spite of all this, the borders of these countries continued to roughly follow the lines of rivers and mountains: Bosnia and Herzegovina were separated from Serbia by the Drina River; the Drava River ran between Croatia and Hungary; Slovenia was enclosed by the Drava and Sava rivers; the Morava line stood between Austria and Slovakia; the Maritza River divided the Bulgarians from the Greeks and Turks; and the Struma River kept the Macedonians away from everyone. The Romanian-Hungarian border was marked by the Tisza River, Ukraine by the Dniester River, and, in the south, the Danube separated Wallachia from Bulgaria. Albanians and Montenegrins were safely nestled in the Balkan ranges, while the vast Pannonian *pustza* was the homeland for Hungarians. And, most of these natural borders are still on the map, having survived endless cycles of imperial domination and socio-political shifts over the last five centuries.

NOTES

1. Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 218.

2. Modern archeology in Transylvania has discovered burial objects from the Arpadian era along the Bega and Mures rivers in the Banat and Bihor regions. These streams provided easy access for the Magyars who wandered into Transylvania. Still, a few Hungarian graves from the eleventh and twelfth centuries does not constitute proof of a conquest-era cemetery; finding one hair ring and a copper coin minted by Bela III does not imply that the Magyars occupied Transylvania. It is a known fact that Magyar mercenaries were hired by Transylvanian fortified cities and many died there. Pagan and semi-Christianized Hungarians roamed all across Europe and trav-

elers often died or were robbed and killed on their journeys; Greek coins in Poland do not prove that Greece occupied that area. Furthermore, most Hungarian warriors were heavily engaged in pillaging Western Europe, while their Pannonian homeland, (called Tourkia by the Byzantines), were practically defenseless, leaving the Magyars in no position to carry out an invasion in Carpathian Mountains where *terra Vlachorum* existed.

3. *The Deeds of the Hungarians* was written in Latin around the year 1200 by an anonymous French author hired at the court of Bela III. This important document is often selectively read by Hungarian and Romanian historians in an effort to provide support for their historic claims and theories.

4. Although it is not based on any reliable historic evidence, one Hungarian theory states that a Romanian population entered the Carpathian Basin during the thirteenth century before the Mongolian invasion, but their settlements were destroyed by the Tartars. It also claims that, as a result of this, the Magyar occupation of a virtually empty Transylvania was a normal migratory move. As for the Romanians, they could, it proposes, have migrated into Transylvania later from south of the Danube, the area to which the surviving Vlach population was forced to flee after the barbarian invasions of Moesia. The Hungarians believe the Romance language spoken by the Romanians to be related to Albanian, and they see no connection to the Roman occupation of Transylvania. The year 1277, when Voievode Litovoi was killed in battle and his brother Barbat was taken prisoner by invading Hungarians in the Hateg region, marked the beginning of the expansion of the Hungarian border into the Romanian principality; this occurred after Barbat accepted the suzerainty of King Laszlo IV.

5. Stephen Sisa, *The Spirit of Hungary: A Panorama of Hungarian History and Culture* (Morristown, NJ: Vista Books, 1990), 85.

6. The Transylvanian nobleman Mihaly Szilagyi was the brother-in-law of John Hunyadi. In 1458, he led an army of fifteen thousand and placed his nephew, King Matthias, on the Hungarian throne despite popular opposition. He served as the guardian of the teenage king and acted as regent of Hungary, after which he was leader of Transylvanians and a most faithful ally of Prince Vlad Dracula. Dracula married a Szilagyi countess. One little-known fact is that Mihaly Szilagyi was born Mihai Cirin (a Romanian name) but adopted the name of his county (Szilagy/Salaj) as his surname; it was a popular custom for rich people to be named after their estate. Similar examples demonstrate that before 1500 what occurred was more of a Transylvanization of Hungary than vice-versa.

7. In no way was Transylvania ever the "citadel of the Hungarian spirit," nor was it the case that either the Romanians or Vlachs migrated to Transylvania in the thirteenth century from Albania (Sisa, *Spirit of Hungary*, 85; map, 187). Among the arguments claiming that Transylvania belongs to them and that it was originally a province of the Hungarian Kingdom there are some that contend that "the name 'Romania or Romanians' never existed prior to 1861," "there is no trace of Daco-Roman civilization in Transylvania," and "the Romanians cannot bring proof of their existence for almost a thousand year period between C.E. 275 when the Romans departed and 1200 when their appearance in Hungary (Transylvania) is first mentioned" (Sisa, *Spirit of Hungary*, 186). Basically, what Hungarians presume is that Transylvania was

empty before they arrived there from Eurasia: life in Transylvania began with their occupation of it, and the Romanians later appeared out of nowhere. The Hungarian claim to ownership of Transylvania would be like the British asserting that India is their ancestral land because they occupied it.

8. In the words of the historian Niketas: “barbarians who lived in vicinity of Mount Haimos [Balkans], formerly called Mysians and now named Vlachs.” Niketas Choniātēs, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniātēs*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 204.

9. Choniātēs, *City of Byzantium*, 204.

10. Choniātēs, *City of Byzantium*, 204.

11. Later speculation points to the fact that the Asan brothers were of Cuman origin, but their reputable Vlachian family lived in Moesia before the Cuman invasion of Europe. Modern Bulgarians claim the Asan brothers as their own and have erected impressive statues in their honor. But, once again, it is important to note that the Asan family also preceded the Bulgar invasion of Europe.

12. Choniātēs, *City of Byzantium*, 205.

13. Choniātēs, *City of Byzantium*, 235.

14. Choniātēs, *City of Byzantium*, 346.

15. Jonathan Shepard, ed., *The Expansion of Orthodox Europe: Byzantium, the Balkans and Russia* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 298.

16. The heart of Cumania at that time was Transylvania, where the Hungarian kings made a habit of approving governors and local leaders. Before becoming the king of Hungary, Bela governed Transylvania and succeeded to convince only two Cuman chieftains to accept his authority in 1226. But a Hungarian administration or a military occupation of Transylvania is not equivalent to ownership.

17. From Nicopolis, Sigismund traveled to Constantinople where he spent a few weeks. On his way to Rhodes, he sailed through the Dardanelles where he witnessed how the Turks lined up the Hungarians and other captives on the Gallipoli shore and asked the defeated king to come and rescue them. From Rhodes the king continued his voyage across the Adriatic Sea, spending the winter in Ragusa and returning to Buda in the spring of 1397. This highly unpopular monarch was considered a Bohemian by the Magyars and vice-versa. He made it possible for German dynasties to rule Hungary until the First World War.

18. Azia Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: Methuen, 1934), 118.

19. Edward S. Creasy, *History of the Ottoman Turks* (Beirut: Khayats, 1961), 70.

20. Creasy, *Ottoman Turks*, 70.

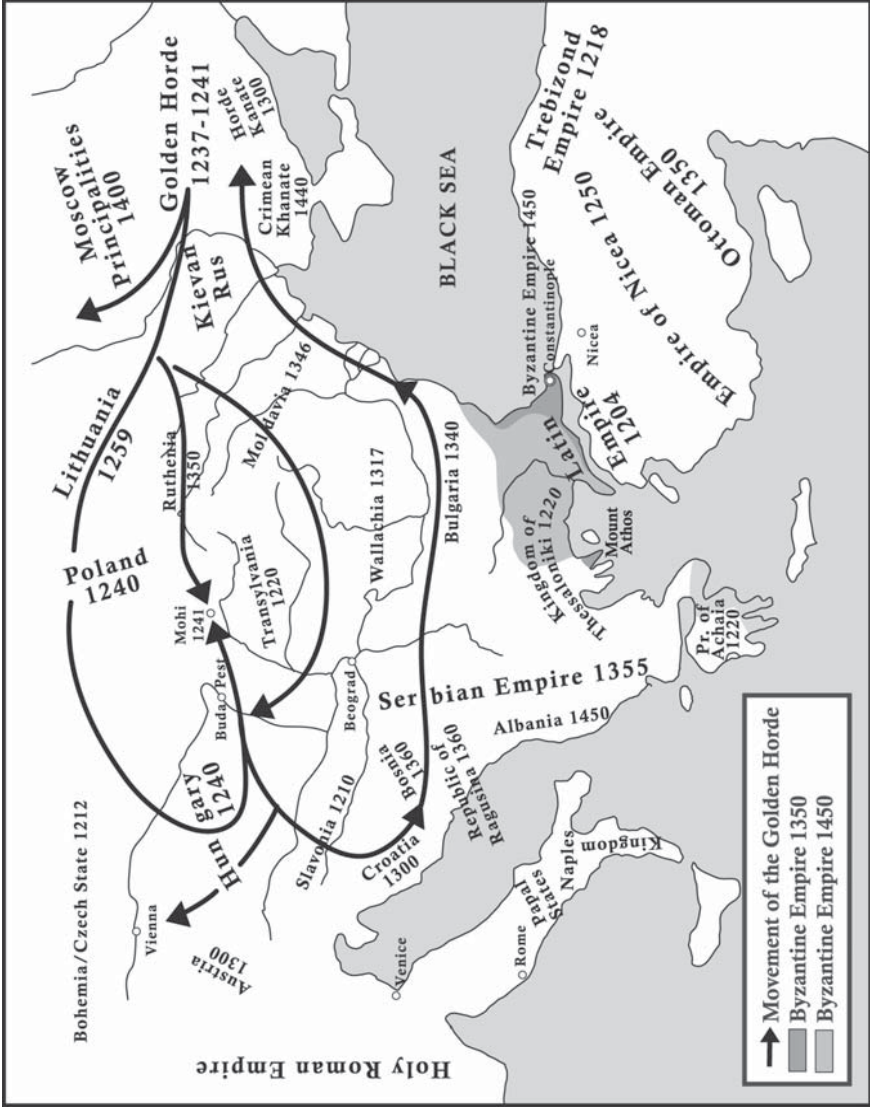
21. After the fall of Communist Yugoslavia, the province of Kosovo witnessed violent ethnic clashes between minority Serbian population and majority Kosovo Albanians who wanted independence. This part of the Balkan civil wars involved Bosnia, Croatia, Herzegovina, and Kosovo and left 110,000 civilians and soldiers dead and 1.8 million people displaced. In spite of the fact that the United Nations and NATO intervened to end the “ethnic cleansing” there, and the fact that Kosovo was placed under international administration, Serbia still regards Kosovo as its sacred ground, an area from which it wishes never to be alienated.

22. The independence of the Republika Srpska/the Serb Republic was declared on August 12, 1992, only to trigger the Bosnian war that produced the largest instance of genocide since WWII. Peace negotiations were held in Paris on December 14, 1995, and an accord was signed: Bosnia and Herzegovina recognized the Republika Srpska with its capital at Sarajevo and its own constitution. By 2008 that constitution had since been amended 121 times.

23. Like Prince Vlad Dracula and his brother Radu, Skandenberg and his brothers spent their childhoods as hostages to the Ottoman Court; Skandenberg converted to Islam, served in the Janissary Corp, and proved a capable officer on the battlefield. His Turkish name, Iskender Bey/Lord Alexander, implies that his military abilities could be likened to those of Alexander the Great. However, his birth name was Gjergj Castrioti/George Castriota, the last name taken from the family Castrioti estate in Debar, then in Albania, now in Macedonia, at that time heavily inhabited by Vlachs. His mother Voisivia Tribalda was from Serbia, but her last name indicates she was from the Tribalia region, which was also heavily populated by Vlachs, descendants of the Dacianized Tribalii tribe. His brother's name was Stanisha/Staniscia, which could be Stannitsa, a Vlahian name. Before defecting from the Turkish army, Skandenberg put a dagger to the throat of the personal secretary of the sultan, forcing him to write to the strong Turkish garrison of Croia ordering it to accept his command because he was named the viceroy of the Ottoman Empire. After he murdered the secretary he went to Albania with a contingent of followers and, according to the document he carried, took command of the fortress of Croia. His men disarmed the Turks who were then massacred by the vengeful Albanian population. After Scandenberg solemnly renounced Islam, he was hailed as a hero and national liberator. For the next twenty-seven years he proved to be just that for the Albanians. Today the Aromanians, Albanians, and Serbians dispute his origins. Sadly, after the year 1500, the Albanians proved to be the strong punishing arm of the Ottoman occupation in the Balkans.



Map 1. Migration of the Eurasian Tribes in Eastern Europe and Years of Their First Settlements, C.E. 500–900. Source: Map created by author.



Map 3. Eastern Europe: 1204–1450. Source: Map created by author.



Map 4. The Balkan Peninsula: 1453–1500. Source: Map created by author.

Chapter Six

The Social and Economic Life of the Manor

As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the invading Bulgars, Magyars, Serbs, and Slavs who had lived a nomadic and pastoral life in distant Eurasia never encountered the Romans. Hundreds of years passed before they formed clans and tribes with a common ethnicity and language, and even more time passed before chieftains founded their own dynasties and tribal elitism evolved into a rudimentary aristocracy. Their steppe societies were based on military organization; their family values included sharing and trading only amongst themselves. They were people with no homeland or government, always on the move, plundering their way through life. With no self-sustaining economy, they had to keep moving or they would face starvation. Typically, their predatory incursions left trails of blood and swaths of destruction wherever they went, and their savage behavior induced terror in settled societies. Consider the following: “When the black swarm of Hungarians first hung over Europe, above (*sic*) nine hundred years after the Christian era, they were mistaken by fear and superstition for the Gog and Magog of the Scriptures, the signs and forerunners of the end of the world.”¹ This aptly applied to all the barbarian invaders of Europe who were pillagers, not builders.

For centuries, countless barbarian tribes massed north of the Danube. Constantinople either looked down on them or ignored them; all of them, even the good natured and obedient Slavs, were considered to be worthless pagans and non-Europeans. While some barbarians became part of the Byzantine Empire, mainly by offering their military services to its government, the masses of them were held at bay until their numbers grew so large that they pushed past the feeble border troops and spilled into the empire. The emperors then tried to bribe them with money and allocations of land, but this desperate measure brought with it a new set of dangerous complications. What did the barbarians find after crossing south of the Danube River into the Byzantine Empire

and how was it different from their own Stone Age society? They galloped into a medieval feudal society, well governed by Constantinople, and found themselves confronted with Christianity, with its dogma and Greek-style morality.

The Byzantine Empire was marked by four distinct social classes: the nobility, the peasants, the soldiers, and the small producers. Another smaller category, namely, church servants, was more like a religious cast. The nobility included princely families, land owners, and knights or warlords. The prince or king owned vast lands and gifted estates to individuals who were loyal or rendered vital services; they thus became vassal landlords with their own right to rule a specific land and its inhabitants. Such landowners, also referred to as boyars, were important to the monarch because they provided revenues and warriors for the crown. Some of them were knights from the warrior class of nobility. That is, they were either siblings of royalty, and therefore privileged to wear weapons and armor as a status symbol, or they were military officers in uniform who bore different titles in different nations. Their job was glamorous—to fight in the name of honor, be it for oneself, someone else, or a noble cause. The knight was for hire as an expensive mercenary during times of war; during peace time he indulged in a life of leisure combined with intense military training.

Peasants, or serfs, farmed the land; they were called *jobbágy* in Hungary, *rataj* in Poland, *krepostnoi krestyanin* in Russia, *șerbi* in the Romanian principalities, and other names elsewhere; hereditarily they belonged to the manor. Because they could not be bought or sold, they were not slaves, but they also could not leave their landlord. During times of war, they were conscripted as peasant soldiers who fought under the banner of their master, who was either a boyar or a knight. The serfs had hard lives, working the land non-stop, with their families living in one room which often was an extension of the animal barn. The members of their families were their only possession, and couples had numerous children since they represented both a labor force and insurance against poverty in old age.

Two types of soldiers fought in the wars and maintained order in peace time—conscripts and mercenaries. The first were peasant warriors armed with farm tools that served as weapons, such as axes, long knives, pitch forks, etc.; they lacked military training and therefore tended to be unruly and inefficient. By contrast, mercenaries were professional soldiers, usually foreigners, whose individual or group services were purchased. It was common practice to hire a commander who came with a contingent of soldiers well equipped with uniforms, weapons, and horses. Unlike the peasants who fought to defend their families and the manor, mercenaries went to war to honor a contract and acquire booty. In cases of defeat, if they were offered

better opportunity, they readily switched their loyalty and served the former enemy. Byzantine armies were made up primarily of mercenaries since there was no law requiring general conscription or making it a citizen's duty to fight for the empire. This system was inherited from ancient Greece where slaves were excluded from military service and allowed to die of old age.

The small producer was a blacksmith, cobbler, mason, potter, tailor, ambulant salesman, or a professional of another sort who provided indispensable services to the rest of population. They were named *trgovci* in Serbian, *targovetsi* in Romanian, and *metrics* in Greek; Jewish merchants were called *holkhei* in Hebrew. These producers and peddlers were the most vulnerable members of the society because they carried inventory to market on roads where brigandage was epidemic. Yet, in time the toolmakers and traders achieved wealth, and with it, respect, as they formed powerful guilds that acquired influential members. Eventually their diversified shops led to the creation of commercial streets and their trading activities led to the production of tall merchant ships that could be easily converted into warships.

In Western Europe, a castle was an unmistakable symbol of knightly power. Constructed as a military bastion surrounded by high fortified walls with crenels and watch towers,² it clearly announced to outsiders, "Don't even think about attacking me!" and so ensured the safety of those residing within its walls. Built to last forever, it was self-sustaining—well-manned with people who provided services, supplies, and food. Within its fortified walls, power was centralized at all levels: vassals came to pay homage to their master and reaffirm their loyalty to him; and pilgrims and travelers from other lands stopped there to rest, spend money, and spread news. In Eastern Europe, there were only a handful of castles, and these were primarily the legacy of a western power's temporary takeover of various lands, such as the Germans in Austria (which had some fifteen hundred castles), the Baltic states, Czechia, and Poland. Barbarians, with their primitive weapons, were in no position to attack and occupy a large fortification, but, with no castles to slow them down and break their confidence, they could easily advance some fifty miles a day in the Balkans. Constantinople, with its many intimidating walls and edifices, was the exception; it was the sole "barbarian-proof" city.

The equivalent of a castle in the Balkans was the manor house; it was a large fortified residence that met all the needs of the landlord, his family, servants, and bodyguards. Fortified monasteries, which were themselves large landlords, also protected people and goods. The manor house (*conac* in Romanian) was constructed with no windows on the first and second floors; the entrance was built to withstand brutal assaults. Like a castle, a large manor house had an interior courtyard with rooms, barns, storage areas, and other facilities around it, with a well in the center. It was a place for the landlord

who was also the taxman, judge, and warlord—a kind of knight. He likely had been a *kavallarios*, a horse-mounted soldier from a well-to-do family whose bravery on the battlefield had been rewarded with land and serfs. Despite the fact that he held only the title of landlord, he had unlimited control over his submissive serfs who would kneel before him and kiss his hand. This kind of blind and servile obedience pervaded all levels of Eastern European society. Any class conflict was instantly condemned by the church, for the monarch (or landlord, or whoever was in power) was taken to represent God's will and thus shared His authority. The monarch (*basileus* in Greek) was thought to be protected by God.

From 529 onward, the peoples of the Balkans were officially ruled by royal and civic laws as well as the twelve books of the Justinian Code (based on Roman Law); these proscribed fair exchanges between people and legislated certain rights that were to be enjoyed by everyone. In practice, however, the oral laws and traditions passed down through generations were the law of the land. The Biblical concept of justice—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—was the way of life in the Balkans. People readily took the law into their own hands to avenge a crime, respond to an insult, or solve a dispute. A man who sought vengeance was showing pride in his family's reputation, and his status was commensurate with the amount of force he used. Public and private violence were so common that the number of male villagers dwindled over time. Since this unnecessary bloodshed affected revenues, landholders stepped in to terminate it. Any outsider was regarded with suspicion and assumed to be an enemy; if he didn't leave quickly, he was attacked. Foreign occupation was considered unavoidable and was only reluctantly tolerated. To get even, people avoided paying taxes. In fact, dodging the return of any borrowed or promised money became a skill in itself. In short, mocking authority was viewed as a collective virtue, and stealing from the rich, a heroic deed.

Ironically, the temporary barbarian occupation of the decentralized Byzantine lands freed the peasants from their regulated life and labor in the manorial hamlets and villages. A set of laws was promulgated ("Farmer's Law") which decreed the nonpayment of taxes to be a crime and condoned the punishment of thieves, for both of these affected the collection of revenue for the empire's treasury. If a free peasant did not pay taxes or left his land for more than thirty years, his family had to forfeit ownership of it. The law did allow farmers to exchange parcels of land among themselves. Subsequently, the rulers of the newly formed barbarian states quickly discovered that laws had to be introduced, and, even before written documents were available in the Slavic societies, royal decrees were orally implemented in each manorial territory. Still, local traditions and customs superseded any new laws. Family feuds, avenging one's honor, and other types of disputes were most often

settled by resorting to a duel. In other cases, the judgment of God prevailed: an accused person who survived the carrying of a hot iron in his palms from the church entrance to the altar, or who did not drown when forcibly submerged and held under water, was declared “innocent.”

Barbarian immigrants needed a long time and had to suffer a great deal of social turbulence before they were willing to move from nomadic tents and mud huts into dwellings that resembled houses. It took them even longer to learn how to handle a shovel instead of a sword, and to create their own society modeled on the Byzantine Empire—itsself a galaxy of different nations and social structures. During the reign of Czar Boris I (852–889), the Christianized Bulgars adopted a version of the Justinian Code. They omitted punishments for giving a false oath and minting counterfeit coins, but added them for adultery, worshiping pagan gods, and sharing war booty. Vladimir the Great and his son Yaroslav the Wise issued the written *Russkaya Pravda*/the Russian True Law which provided the norms of the Kievan society in the eleventh century. The Magyars made a huge legal leap when they segued from honoring the judgment of a shaman to interpreting German laws. After 1000, King Stephen I of Hungary held an open court one day per year during which he listened to, and made decisions concerning, the grievances of his subjects, regardless of their economic and social status. The Golden Bull of 1222, issued by King Andrew II of Hungary, established principles of equality for all of the nation’s nobility and ensured their freedom to disobey the king and pay no taxes to him; they were not required to pay for his wars. It further stipulated that the aristocracy could hold the king accountable for not respecting the law and could restrict his power—there could be no more arbitrary arrests and punishments without a judicial investigation. In case of war outside the Hungarian border, the king would have to pay for the troops and their knights. Stricter laws were introduced in 1468 by King Matthias, including some that limited the power of landlords and the aristocracy who had not previously been subject to royal control. His love for justice and his willingness to side with commoners led to the epithet, “Matthias the Just.”

Polish society was similarly influenced by German laws; for example, a nobleman who killed another could escape punishment if he made satisfactory restitution to the victim’s family. The most advanced set of laws was Serbia’s *Dušanov Zakonik* (Dusan’s Code) of 1349 and 1354, which came close to being a constitution with its two hundred edicts regulating all aspects of life. It included laws that dealt with the sponsorship of monks and the fate of escaped prisoners; a death sentence was the prescribed punishment for highway robbery and the murder of church servants, while repeat offenders were to have their hands, noses, or ears cut off, or were to be blinded as an example to others. The Dusan Code allowed Vlach herdsmen³ to have their own

jurisdiction and trade system. This edict also applied to the Saxon mining colonies. In Wallachia and Moldavia, versions of the Slavic and Byzantine laws were adopted in the mid- fifteenth century. All these laws were subject to manorial court interpretation; appeals were rarely granted.

The Justinian Code and *lèse majesté* (from Latin *laesa maiestas*/injured majesty) had virtually no impact at the royal level in the Byzantine Empire; however, a case in point is what happened to Emperor Maurice (r. 582–602) and his successors. His decision to reduce military payments by 25 percent led to a mutiny and to the enthronement of General Phocas in 602. To make sure that Maurice (who became a monk) and his family could never become a political threat, Phocas executed the former emperor and his five sons; he placed their heads on public display and tossed their bodies into the sea. Maurice's wife and three daughters were exiled to a monastery, and thousands of those who were loyal to the former rulers were murdered. Eight years later, Phocas himself was overthrown. Upon taking him prisoner, Heraclius (r. 610–641) reportedly asked, "Is this how you have ruled, wretch?" Phocas haughtily responded, "And will you rule better?" but his last word was cut short as his head was chopped off. His mutilated body was paraded throughout Constantinople and finally burned. The House of Heraclius ended with Justinian II whose nose was cut off by the revolting General Leontius, who became emperor in 695. Leontius, in turn, was overthrown by his generals. They cut off his nose and paraded him through the streets. He was later executed by Justinian II when he was restored to power (in 705). Soon, the emperor faced a military revolt and summary execution, including of his six-year old son who had been sheltered in a church. In 797, Queen Irene dethroned her son Constantine VI, blinded him, and became empress of the empire.

In spite of all the humane and civil laws, killing for power became a way of life at the Byzantine court and continued to be so for the next four hundred years. Even historian Anna Comnena, a woman of character and intellect and a critic of her time, was involved with her mother in assassinating her brother Emperor John II. When she was exiled to a convent, she dedicated her energy to writing about the tumultuous history of her father, thus documenting the horrors that took place in the Balkans during the reign of Alexius I. Three decades after her death, the child emperor Alexius II, grandson of her father, was strangled together with his protective mother. The perpetrator, Andronicus, assumed the royal title in 1183. To ensure the stability of his throne, the fifty-six year-old Andronicus married the thirteen year-old widow of Alexius II. Isaac II succeeded to the Byzantine crown after his cousin Andronicus I was murdered by a revolting mob in 1185. Ten years later, Isaac II was blinded and imprisoned by his brother Alexius III, only to be placed back on the throne again together with his son Alexius IV in 1203; both were executed

six months later by rebels. In 1261, Emperor John IV was blinded by his second cousin, Michael VIII, who wanted to ensure that the eleven year-old would never recapture the throne. Thus the Byzantine society was ruled by some of its emperors!

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 ended the Byzantine legacy of fratricide for the love of purple and crown. The final victor was Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446 and 1451–1481), who was glorified as the Conqueror and a luminary of the arts and sciences. When he was named sultan, the first thing he did was to eliminate any inherited competition. When his father, Murad II died, his Serbian wife had just given birth to a baby son; Mehmed ordered the baby to be drowned in a bath while his mother was congratulating the new sultan. To prove his innocence and keep his esteem high at his Sublime Porte (Ottoman Government), Mehmed ordered the execution of the assassin. However, when he later issued a criminal and constitutional law, he advocated royal fratricide, claiming that it was necessary for the sake of the empire. This justification was widely used both before and after the rule of Mehmed II.

The rest of the Balkan rulers followed the inspiring examples of the mighty emperors and sultans, considering murder a legitimate way to preserve their crown and ensure their dominance. After ruling Bulgaria for thirty-seven years, Czar Boris I piously retreated to his beloved monastery and named his son Vladimir as his successor. It turned out that Vladimir hated the newly founded Bulgarian Orthodox Church, persecuted its leaders, and even put its archbishop to death. He sought an alliance with German King Arnulf, not with Constantinople. His father, who years earlier had murdered fifty-two anti-Christian noblemen and their entire families, came out of retirement in 893 and exercised his authority by blinding, deafening, and imprisoning his rebellious son. He installed his other son, Simeon, on the throne, warning him that he would suffer from the same fate if he repeated his brother's mistake. In 1314, across the border in Serbia, King Milutin blinded his son, Stefan III Dečanski, who had rebelled against his father, and exiled him to Constantinople. In 1441, Serbian despot Brankovich blinded his son Stefan when he suspected him of disloyalty in order to solidify his autocratic position. The Hungarian king Coloman blinded his younger brother and his son Bela II; the latter became king in 1131. Prince Vlad Dracula's father, Vlad II Dracul, was murdered in 1447 by a rival clan who also used hot irons to blind his other son, Mircea, and buried him alive. When he became a ruler of Wallachia, Dracula impaled those responsible for the murder of his father and brother, and forced one of them to conduct his own funeral in front of his grave before he beheaded him. Cruelty was the main tool for wreaking revenge, gaining victory, and holding the power of the throne.

At times, clever and deceitful modes of diplomacy were commingled with force and the result was unanticipated social and international tensions. When Bulgarian Czar-turned-monk Peter suddenly died in 969, his son Boris II was being held as an honored hostage by Emperor Nicephorus II in Constantinople. As was often the case, the vacant throne was challenged by four brothers of another noble family who staged an uprising in unstable and weak Bulgaria. Nicephorus rushed Boris home with a Byzantine military escort who installed him on the throne. At the end of 969, Prince Sviatoslav invaded Bulgaria again and captured Boris and his brother Roman and forced them into submission. The Russians and their Pecheneg allies raided south of the Balkan Mountains and produced so much alarm in Constantinople that Nicephorus was murdered by his wife's lover General John Tzimisce. Aiming to take over the throne, the general arrested and exiled the empress; thus Emperor John II saved Constantinople after defeating the Russians and forcing them out of Bulgaria. He liberated Boris who was conveniently used to incorporate Bulgaria into the Byzantine Empire. Boris II returned to the throne only to be killed by one of his anti-Byzantine soldiers; his brother Roman became the next czar. Emperor John was also murdered by his own court, and Prince Sviatoslav was killed by his former allies, the Pechenegs. It took the powerful Emperor Basil II (r. 976–1025) to re-establish Byzantine supremacy in the Balkans. To do this, he defeated the Bulgars and blinded fifteen thousand of their prisoners as a lesson in obedience. When he saw his mutilated warriors, Czar Samuil died of heart attack, an incident that marked the end of the First Bulgarian Empire.

Paradoxically, throughout the Balkans it was considered an unpardonable offense to intend to harm or to insult a monarch or any authority at the manorial or military level. Such thoughts or behavior were considered to be the equivalent of heresy and treason, yet retribution did not require a judge to legislate punishment. Vlad Dracula was renowned in his own time for inflicting instant "justice." Called "the Impaler" because of his signature punishment, he was determined to eliminate domestic and foreign enemies and create a crime-free society. The fierce Prince of Wallachia seldom gave a wrongdoer a second chance. A dead criminal or adversary could do no more harm, and his impalement served as a lesson for others. Dracula was the ultimate enforcer of *l'èse majesté*.

Medieval society was focused on dynastic power rather than on nationalistic or political ideals. Dynasties took over lands through alliances, wars, and marriages, thus deciding the fate of millions. Royal weddings were second only to war in being the most important events of this time, and they were credited with both creating and solving most of the problems associated with societies and nations in conflict. To prevent the destruction and occupation

of Bulgaria by the Tartars and the Turks, Czar Terter married his daughter to the son of Khan Nogai in 1285, and Terter married the sister of John Asen III, thus securing his throne. In the subsequent century, the sister of Czar Ivan Shishman joined the harem of Sultan Murad I, which did not stop his son Bayezid from beheading the czar in 1395. Stephen Milutin II (r. 1282–1321) expertly secured his throne by marrying the daughter of Bulgarian Czar George I, the daughter of King Stephen V of Hungary, and the daughter of Emperor Andronikus II; his multiple marriages, on the other hand, did not produce harmony in his kingdom, as evidenced by the fact that he was forced to blind one of his sons to restore order.

Not surprisingly, dramatic events often occurred when marriages went awry. When Bulgarian Czar Gavril/Gabriel fell in love with another woman, he sent his pregnant wife back to her angered father, the proud King Geza of Hungary. Meanwhile, Gavril's sister, Theodora, fell in love with the enemy of her family, Serbian Prince Vladimir. He was released from prison and reinstated with all his rights by her father Czar Samuil. Gavril, who reigned for only a few months, was murdered, together with his wife and child, by his cousin Ivan Vladislav (whose father was murdered by Gavril's father, while he himself was saved by Gavril). In 1015, Ivan became the next Bulgarian czar. He also beheaded Vladimir⁴ to eliminate any dynastic competition; Ivan was assassinated by his bodyguards three years later. When the Latin Emperor Baldwin I (r. 1204–1205) was defeated and captured by the Vlachian king Ioannitsa at the Battle of Adrianople, he was first treated as a royal guest. But when he tried to seduce the king's wife, his hands and feet were cut off by the jealous Ioannitsa, and he was thrown in a dungeon and left to die. After the king's assassination, his only daughter, Princess Maria, wed the Latin Emperor Henry in 1214 and traveled to Constantinople with a caravan of sixty horses, draped in red velvet, carrying her dowry; the costly wedding celebration was a national event. Two years later, Henry was poisoned, and Maria was the first suspect. After Bulgarian Czar Michael III divorced Serbian Princess Anna, he made a deadly enemy of her brother King Stefan III; in 1330 Michael was captured on the battlefield and subsequently died of his wounds. Czar Ivan Alexander caused public outrage in 1349 when he divorced his Wallachian wife and married a converted Jewess. She changed her name from Sara to Theodora and became the first Jewish queen in Europe.

Legally, a groom had to be fifteen years of age and his bride thirteen, and all royal marriages were arranged between families for purpose of forming or ensuring alliances. Ample preparations and negotiations for the exchange of titles and dowries of land, money, and other gifts were trumpeted rituals. A royal couple was expected to produce children, especially a son who would succeed his father on the throne. Periodically, unusual marriages took

place in order to ensure government stability. For example, in 1299 at age forty-six, Prince Milutin married Simonis, the five-year-old daughter of Andronicus II. He raped her when she was eight-years old and the wounds left her sterile. Milutin proved a good ally to her father and sent two thousand horsemen to help Andronicus fight Turks in Anatolia. After his death, Simonis returned to Constantinople. Another example is that of King Matthias of Hungary (r. 1458–1490), who married Elizabeth of Celie. She died before the marriage was consummated, leaving the Hungarian king a widower at age fifteen. At eighteen, in order to be crowned king, he married nine year-old Catherine of Podebra; at fourteen, she gave birth and died with her infant. In 1464, he then married Beatrice of Naples, who failed to bear him any children. So, the only heir to the Hungarian throne was his illegitimate son, Janos Corvinus, whose mother was Matthias's mistress. After Matthias died, the boy was ignored by the Hungarian aristocracy. They elected Wladyslaw Jagiello of Poland and Lithuania, known to Hungarians as Ulaszlo II, to rule, and Beatrice immediately married him in 1491. When this marriage also proved to be childless, it was dissolved, and Beatrice was sent back home to Italy where she died at age fifty. The absence of male descendants always created dynastic problems, most often national crises of succession. All in all, monogamy was not a virtue of the czars and emperors. Most of them had extramarital affairs and married many times, and most of their ex-wives ended up in convents and their illegitimate children often killed each other in attempts to claim the throne.

Dukes and manorial lords tried to keep up with the royal weddings, but such marriages were the most important social institution and glorious event in the life of commoners. They were planned by the parents who engaged in long and elaborate negotiations over the dowry; it usually consisted of domestic animals, furniture, clothing, money or gold, and other goods that would be exchanged between the families, and bargaining was the norm. In most cases, the bride and groom were from the same village, so clannish ties were maintained and family wealth was kept close to home. An outsider needed an entire lifetime to be accepted by villagers, and even his children had to prove themselves worthy to be residents. The feudal landlord had to approve any marriage and settlement of a new member of the village.

The honor of a woman and preservation of her purity was one of the few cardinal and unwritten rules that was actually obeyed throughout the Balkans. In the morning after the wedding, the groom would show the partying guests the white bed sheet spotted with blood to prove the virginity of his bride. From then on, the children born by his wife were recognized without any suspicion regarding the fatherhood. No pregnant woman or

a woman holding a child could be harmed in any way. A wife had to be entirely submissive to her husband, but after a crisis she could take over the family affairs. A married woman had to have her head covered with a scarf or a similar garment to indicate that she was married, and to touch a woman, especially someone's wife, was sufficient cause for bloody retaliation. This applied even to dancing. In the patriarchal society of the Balkans men danced with men and women with women in rows that did not touch. In spite of their lesser social status, women were excluded from the code of revenge and violence. Her male relatives acted as guardians. In Albania, for instance, no man walking with a woman could be attacked or harmed. Yet, if a wife showed disrespect for her husband, she could be subject to corporal punishment; adultery could bring instant death. Divorce was rare and condemned by the Church and the community.

Byzantine society was in endless civil turmoil from its inception to its collapse and all of this was greatly aggravated by the ongoing influx of barbarian migrants. Its traditional Greek civilization was continually tested by daily events, and civility was often maintained by the police, as described by Thomas Magister, a Byzantine scholar and confidant of Andronicus II (r. 1282–1328) in his native Thessaloniki:

Their weapon is cruelty. They live the way that wild beasts live; everyday sees them starting or pursuing some new quarrel. They steal the property of the rich, as in Athens at the time of the Thirty Tyrants. You can see men pledging their sworn oath and simultaneously breaking it. You can see them in the marketplace, using their fists on people's faces, knocking them down, raining blows upon their backs, dragging others along by the beard—yes, old men too—shouting insults and obscene threats. This is part of the regular way of life here. Such things happen all the time: public brawls that make the night streets hideous, honest citizens set upon by bullies, drunken and dissolute mobs roaming the alleyways, walls broken through, property stolen, houses ransacked, and all that sort of thing—no, worse than that: arson, stone-throwing, vicious assaults, a whole string of murders committed every day, knife and scimitar kept ready for instant action. They do not even take their weapons off to go to bed. You might well think they could not live without them.⁵

This scenario of fast talking and temperamental Greeks always ready to insult and fight something out quickly found popularity among other ethnicities. It was typical throughout the Balkans. Indeed, if it took place in the city of Thessaloniki, a metropolis of super-rich commercial establishments that rightly boasted of its artistic and cultural life, its university, splendid churches, and thriving economy, then it could (and did) happen anywhere. In fact, Thessaloniki was the second best city to live in within the empire. It is

therefore no wonder that such an unruly society was destined to be crushed by the equally violent Turks in 1430.

Where leadership was concerned, Byzantine social order in each of the new countries changed little over time. Serbia, for instance, retained its traditional *zupan* and despot titles. These were borrowed by many Balkan nations; the Hungarian equivalents were *gyula* and *karkha*; and the titles of *ban*, *duke*, and *herzeg/herzog* were prevalent in Banat (Transylvania), Croatia, and Dalmatia. The word for sovereign was *wojewoda* in Poland and *voievode* or *domnitor* in the Romanian principalities; his iconic image was painted showing a crown on his head and a mace or scepter in his hand. Being a prince implied that an individual had a “royal bone,” meaning one of his parents descended from a king, *cnez/czar*, or emperor. Nepotism was widespread and was indeed a sort of double edged sword: relatives could either aid or destroy a ruler. One’s title and social position followed one to the grave, and the best burial grounds (very often inside churches) had impressive monuments indicating the social and political importance of the deceased, including royal women.

What complicated the social order of each country were the numerous ethnic invasions. These always resulted in social unrest. With Hungary under attack from all directions by powerful enemies and threatened with inevitable Ottoman occupation, more Hungarians poured into safe Transylvania. But their growing settlements and the spread of their language led to unsolvable ethnic conflicts with the ancient local population. Three distinctive societies had parallel and separate lives within Transylvania—the Hungarians, the Germans, and the Vlachs, and each was determined to preserve its own autonomy. Soon, the aboriginal Vlachs, who were mostly shepherds and farmers came to be considered second class inhabitants and lost their privileges. In the meantime, the mining areas of Transylvania attracted Hungarian and other ethnic laborers, and the *Diploma Andreanum* issued by King Andras/Andrew II in 1224 gave autonomy and special economic privileges to the Saxons and Germans living there. This measure increased the powerful commercial and economic impact of the “guest workers” of Saxons and Szekelys; the latter considered themselves the real Magyar nobility. It led to the establishment of states within the state, independent local colonies, such as Universitas Saxorum and Szekelyland, with their own distinctive societies. However, they paid taxes not to the Hungarian king, but to their communities. A similar set of political conditions developed with the Germans in Poland.

The Ottoman occupation and the vassalage it brought in its wake had, however, little effect on the hierarchy with respect to old titles among various ethnicities. Of all the occupiers, the Turks were interested only in economic and military objectives—primarily fortresses where garrisoned troops were backed up by administrative personnel who supervised the application of

the Ottoman demands. A *pasha* was in charge of the military matters of a *pashalac* (region), a *beg/bey* was the governor of a province, and a *vizier* was entrusted with certain sub-territories; none of them bothered to intervene at the level of the manor or the village where the lifestyle and culture remained largely unchanged through the centuries. This was also the situation with a *raya* (herd/subjects—a conquered province or a large fortified city with the land surrounding it) where Turkish appointments concerned only high positions, most importantly, a local, pro-Ottoman prince. As long as he paid the required tribute to the Porte, he could do anything he pleased in his country. Moreover, in the event of a crisis, he could rely on a Turkish army to back up his will, regardless of whether the problem was with his own nobility or that of a neighboring country.

Even when Ottoman control of a nation was militarily enforced, Islam was never imposed on Christians, although some people, especially the aristocracy, volunteered to adopt it for obvious economic and political reasons. The Ottoman occupation introduced into the Balkans the specialized *kadis* (judges) who were routinely influenced by false witnesses, fake evidence, and most of all, by the customary bribery. Any Christian witness who accused a Turk was dismissed as unreliable. This created nightmarish situations when unhappy victims took the law in their own hands. A Turk could not be judged or sentenced by a Christian court. The Turkish public bath, the mosque, and the Crescent flag were the trademarks of lost independence of a nation.

In distant Russia, the dominant power of the Golden Horde duplicated the Ottoman methods of imposing authority and collecting taxes. The Tartars dealt only with rulers of the land, who were in no position to object to any of the Mongols' requirements:

With no army and only a flimsy wooden stockade for defense, the early princes of Moscow relied on their wits for survival. They developed a keen political sense, and they knew how to be humble when necessary. Whenever a Tatar emissary or tax collector arrived outside the city, the prince went out to welcome the visitor, kiss his stirrups, and lead his horse through the city gate. Moscow paid whatever the Tatars asked and always filled the quota of young men demanded for the khan's army.⁶

This became such a routine duty that “even when the Tatars began to lose their grip over subjugated lands, Moscow continued to rule in the Tatar manner. Although the Moskovy princes stopped paying Tatar tribute, they continued to collect taxes.”⁷ The Russian boyars followed the tax system of their princes and proved to be so greedy and cruel with the poor peasants that the serfs became accustomed to being submissive, and remained so for centuries.

A different social order was reflected in the life of the Jews of Europe. By the twelfth century, they numbered more than one million. Most of them lived in the west where the continent's main commercial activity took place. Like the Greeks, they had an enormous cultural advantage over the rest of the Balkanians: they were literate. Being able to communicate in business through letters and contracts made them tremendously successful in commerce and the banking industry. Because they faced increased attacks and massacres, many Jews migrated to Eastern Europe which was free of anti-Semitism. Since they were a nomadic people of a different race and religion, they were never integrated into the feudal system, nor did they ever belong to the serfdom or aristocracy of any country. They lived in hermetic communities, away from the *goyim* (impure Gentiles who ate pigs) population, and no Jew could be seen eating or socializing with a Christian in public. Jewish society was ruled by religious beliefs and powerful guilds of different trades. They did not belong to one nation, but to their own international community, and the Ottomans made the best of this, using them where the Turks had no access in Europe. Ironically, it was Islam, not Christianity that most thoroughly emancipated the Jews. And, overall, it was not difficult for any people to find a comfortable space in the increasingly overcrowded Balkan Peninsula where the Orthodox Church ran supreme in weaving the moral fabric of society.

The edict of Caracalla (212) granted Roman citizenship to all free people living in the empire and thereby enabled Rome to collect taxes from them and enrich its treasury. This meant that illegal immigrants who lived within the empire had to be treated as equal to citizens, a development that was intolerable to the Greeks. Compounding the social and cultural issues of the barbarians was the matter of taxes, which turned out to be a major problem for Constantinople. Although they were willing to be a part of the empire and to fight for it in exchange for land, the barbarians had no intention of paying taxes. Born to die in the saddle, they kept moving, now within the empire's borders, in order to evade the force of fiscal law and to plunder the empire's wealth. By doing so, they resisted integration and undermined the economic power of the Byzantine Empire.

The feudal economic system was, as the name suggests, based on a fief or a fee that a vassal, usually a peasant or a laborer, paid to his lord for the right to use his land or property. It was close to a barter system. It had begun in the late Roman times when emperors granted lands and other possessions in perpetuity as payments or retirement benefits to their military men. The former *coloni* (farming slaves) became serfs (semi-dependent farmers), and the rural economy evolved into a manorial system overseen by a landlord. There was, however, a different economic dynamic in the major cities, especially those

bordering main roads and large navigable waterways where strong markets ensured the regular exchange of goods between merchants. Established city states like Constantinople, Dubrovnik, Kiev, Novgorod, Thessaloniki, and new ones like Novi Pazar (New Market) built by the Serbians, became commercial magnets for both wealth and predators. When the Aegean Sea became a Byzantine gulf, the merchants of Constantinople had the upper hand in all commercial activity that took place north and south of it.

Tribal economies were still strong and visible in local markets or large fairs, and later in the bazaars where grains, wine, smoked meats, honey, spices, furs, artisan's products, etc. were traded. The Vlachs, who owned herd animals all across Eastern Europe, were known as *pastores Romanorum* in Pannonia, and they were the primary movers of goods by oxen and mule carts and so also the protectors of the commercial caravans crossing the Balkans. It is likely that they had a network of inns with relay stations for changing traction animals (every fifteen miles or so) and providing services for the commercial caravans. The Vlachs were specialized in selling milk and wool-related items, animal skins and, above all, salt, that precious food commodity from Transylvania. Since they had free access to land from one end of the Balkans to the other, they were perhaps the only traders to carry valuable blocks of ice wrapped in straw from the mountain peaks to the ice cream makers on the scorching Aegean shores. It is certain that they supplied dairy products to the monks of Mount Athos. In the complex economics of the Byzantine Empire, large revenues also came from making tools, weapons, household utensils, and art and luxury objects, all of which required iron, steel, and other metals.

The Byzantines possessed a splendid tradition of manufacturing. From the 550s onward, when Christian missionaries smuggled silk worms out of China, they held the silk monopoly in Europe. But their commerce was now greatly affected by the invasions that destroyed markets and trade. Eurasian tribes tumbled into the Byzantine Empire for centuries, bringing with them their "barbarian industry" based on theft and coercion. Their concept of revenue was similar to that of the Khazars (who lived between the Black and Caspian seas), in which a chieftain could make a fortune by selling entire families, confiscating their properties, or killing those who could not pay their debts as a lesson in economics for others. Moreover, "Eastern sources recording the conditions about the middle of the ninth century also report that the Hungarians imposed burdensome taxes in kind on the Slavs, assaulted them, plundered them, carried the Slav prisoners to Byzantine towns where they sold them as slaves."⁸ Eventually, barbarian tribes that had settled in the Balkan Peninsula began to learn the value of hard work from the civilized people there. In time, they also adopted Christianity and the feudal system

of the Byzantines. While the center of political power in the empire was Constantinople, the heart of commerce was its rich borough of Phanar. This well known section of the city became politically stronger with each passing century. Regardless of any changes elsewhere in the city or the empire, this district, which was run by Greeks, maintained and even increased its economic power and political influence over every aspect of life in the Balkans. It could make or break important commercial transactions as well as major decisions of military and political leaders.

The feudal system in the countryside was based on serfdom (the perpetual servitude of peasants), a vital necessity when it came to settling migrants or relocating homeless people on large estates belonging to landholders. The landowners could be members of royalty, monasteries, or landlords named *boyarin/boljarin* in Russian, *bolyar* in Bulgarian, *boier* in Romanian, and *bojar* in Hungarian. Each of these terms referred to a country nobleman who possessed varying amounts of wealth and power. In Eastern Europe they established boyarhoods which, like any other manor economy, resulted in a system of commercial agriculture. Landowners provided the peasants who worked for them with housing, farming tools, traction animals, seeds, mills, and military protection. The villagers who lived on the manor estates were *serfs* (renters) who paid their landlord in labor and taxes. This system is referred to as a tithe system (a 10 percent donation was required); however, it did not apply to use of the forests, pastures, and rivers shared by each community. It was common for a peasant to have a small lot on which to grow food for himself and his family. In some cases the family of a serf could receive up to thirty acres to manage and pay for farming privileges. In such a work setting, a cottage industry of making dairy products, spinning wool and looming textile or making rugs became increasingly specialized and the exchange of goods and services became profitable. Making wine was also lucrative. But, high levels of competition developed between small producers (who paid taxes) and monasteries (which were tax exempt). When a country was absorbed into the empire, serfs were subjected to double taxation. Multiple payments had to be made to both their local and foreign masters. Wars added an extra tax burden, and looting raids reduced villagers to total poverty.

Regardless of changes in ruler, dynasty, or foreign occupation, the serfs and villages remained the property of the same landlords who maintained their autonomy and jurisdiction over their manor-estate. Earning money by trading products was vital to sustaining the manorial system. The problem was that the governor, who had probably acquired his administrative position for a substantial bribe, was trusted by a monarch to collect taxes from a province. Typically, the governor did not leave Constantinople to go to his

assigned post; instead he empowered local tax collectors to do his work. And they routinely collected taxes in triplicate: one required by the state, another for the governor to pay his salary and debt, and another for themselves. Their small armies enforced the collection and, while doing so, demanded their share of money as well. This became the standard procedure, and complaints to the emperor by manor lords did nothing to punish the abusers since they were invariably protégés of a highly ranked courtier.

With regard to import and export taxes between the states, things went from bad to worse and brought about major unrest throughout Balkans and Eastern Europe, with many historical consequences. Wars have always had an economic motto: the spoil belongs to the victor. But the first “trade war” happened during the reign of Czar Simeon I (r. 893–927) when the market for Bulgarian goods was moved from Constantinople to Thessaloniki, the commercial capital of the Balkans. For the Bulgarian merchants, the city was difficult to reach by road, and taxes there were enormous. The czar asked Emperor Leo VI to reconsider the decision to tax his merchants so excessively, but since much of the profit went to his mistress, the emperor ignored the complaint. Simeon, however, knew how to get the response he wanted. Utilizing a “trade or raid” policy in 894, he invaded the empire and defeated Leo’s army in Macedonia. This economic victory proved to have unexpected consequences—it opened up the path for other trade wars. Having lost the battle, Leo pressed the Magyars to attack Bulgaria from the north; Simeon’s army, caught between two fronts, was forced to retreat and defend his pillaged country. He allied himself with the Pechenegs and defeated the Magyars, pushing them back to Pannonia once and for all. Then, in 896, Simeon once again invaded the imperial lands, defeating another Byzantine army and besieging Constantinople. Leo could not fight back and ended up paying an annual tribute to the Bulgarians, as well as handing over some regions by the Black Sea in exchange for peace. Simeon, who wanted more land, could not keep his side of the bargain and again invaded southward. This time Leo allowed the Bulgarian border to extend fifteen miles north of Thessaloniki. The conflict finally ended with the official recognition of Simeon’s right to bear the title of Emperor of the Bulgarians. Subsequently, the Bulgarian market was moved back to Constantinople.

This entire, protracted struggle over taxes cost the Byzantine Empire dearly; at the same time, it elevated Bulgaria to the status of a major Balkan economic and military power. However, after the death of Simeon, his son Peter I proved to be ineffectual and lost all of the economic privileges that had been gained. And, in 965 Emperor Nicephorus II refused to pay the traditional annual tribute to a Bulgarian embassy which he so despised. “He turned on the ambassadors with a stream of invective, abusing them and their

countrymen as a race of hideous and filthy beggars, triple slaves and sons of dogs, ruled by a prince dressed only in the skins of animals. Then he had them scourged before sending them back empty-handed to Preslav.”⁹ Instead, he used the gold to bribe the Kievans to attack and dismember the Bulgarian Kingdom. Under Emperor Basil II, the Byzantine Empire once again reached a golden age, mainly because of the re-integration of territories and taxes collected from them.

The Hungarians were equally unhappy with the way their merchants were treated by the Byzantines and repeatedly protested to Constantinople; their pleas were, however, ignored. Like the Bulgarians, they were exasperated with this and so took advantage of the Serbian uprising and invaded the empire, plundering it from Branicevo (near Beograd) to Serdica (Sofia). Constantine VIII (r. 1025–1028), who was renowned for his lavish lifestyle, realized the damages done by over taxation, but quickly pushed back the Hungarians. He mercilessly put down the revolt, forcing Serbs to recognize his suzerainty, and deported the prisoners of war to Anatolia where they either became soldiers or settled as farmers. The Hungarians invaded again in 1126, plundering as far south as Philippopolis (Plovdiv), this time suffering defeat on all fronts. They lost their Byzantine holdings around Beograd and Sirmium, and thus deprived the Hungarians of access to the rich commercial traffic of the lower Danube. Another passage to the Danube through Transylvania was commercially vital, so the Hungarians entered the Carpathians and began to exploit the natural resources of the former Dacian land. Modern day discoveries of Hungarian cemeteries around Transylvanian mines, especially salt mines (salt being a requirement of any army), confirm their presence and point to its economic motivation. Like the Romans, Avars, Gepids, and Cumans, the Magyars settled around the gold, silver, and copper mines in Transylvania—but they never left.

Since Emperor Anastasius I (r. 491–518) reformed the monetary system and used Greek numerals instead of Roman ones, the Byzantine Empire had a monopoly over the minting of coins. Its *nomismata* and *hyperpyra* (seventy-two hyperpyra was one pound of gold before the year 1200) carried a lot of buying power, but the Italian *florin* (produced in 1252–1253 from 3.5 grams of gold) became the international currency. It was rivaled by the Venetian *ducat*, which was also widely adopted as the basic currency of the Balkans, and duplicated in Serbia using a poor alloy. In the 1370s, the House of Basarab minted silver coins with the Latin inscription *TRANSALPINA* (Wallachia), with a shield, cross, and raven on them. The sister country of Moldavia minted its coins engraved with *MONETA MOLDAVIE*, featuring a shield, cross (sometimes a double cross), and a bison head. The Romanian coin was known as *ban*, and Prince Dracula had the distinction of putting a

comet on the reverse side of his currency; since the comet was considered a divine sign of good luck, he commemorated the a comet that burned in the skies when he became *domnitor*/ruler of Wallachia.¹⁰ Later, the Turkish silver coins called *akca* (from *asper*) became widespread in Eastern Europe. Nothing, however, replaced gold nuggets, silver bars, and gold coins, regardless of their denomination.

The Byzantine emperors ran their *theme*/provinces with the help of the *strategoi*/*catepani* or governors. These were most often generals who had a strong army detachment that could keep order, collect taxes, and enforce laws. When taxes were increased too much, or the corrupt tax collectors abused their power, populations revolted against Constantinople, as did the Vlachs of Thessaly (named Vlachia Mare/Great Wallachia) in 1066. Later, the Asan brothers¹¹ who spoke “the language of the Vlachs,”¹² lived independently throughout Balkans and demanded recognition of their ethnic status. The Bulgars joined their protest and won both national and fiscal independence. For the next twenty years, the Vlachs defeated each Byzantine and Latin army that was sent to subdue them, and they created their own economic empire named *Regnum Vlachorum et Bulgarorum*.¹³

King Stephen Milutin (r. 1282–1321) owed his personal wealth and the prosperity of Serbia to his military conquests and to the silver and gold mines of Brskovo, Novo Brdo, and Rudnik. One century later Despot Brankovich had an income of two hundred thousand Venetian ducats from the same mines and became famous for being the wealthiest ruler of Europe. These mines were run by the Saxons, who seem to have been the miners of the Balkans. Large Saxon colonies were found in Bosnia, Serbia, and especially in Transylvania, whose abundant gold entitled King Charles Robert to mint the first Hungarian gold coins, the forints, in 1325. Thus, during the fifteenth century, Hungary was one of the largest gold and silver exporters in Europe even though it itself did not have a mining industry. All of its precious metals came from Transylvania. And, the Transylvanian population was so heavily taxed by the Hungarian kings that in 1437 the Vlachs and other ethnic peasants revolted against the fiscal exploitation. Mihai Romanul/Michael the Romanian was one of their leaders.

To counter this, the nobility of the Hungarians, Saxons, and Szeklers passed a measure in self-defense, the *Unio Trium Nationum* (Union of Three Nations). This 1438 legislation excluded from its scope the majority of population—the Vlachs, whose nobility was highly mistrusted by the three unionists. And, this event marked the moment when the former “guests” of Transylvania became its owners. When they defeated the peasant army, the descendents of the Daco-Romans officially became pariahs in their own land. This caused the rest of the Vlachs of Moldavia and Wallachia to think that at

least the Turks would allow them their freedom if they paid the required tribute. In the meantime, in 1467 King Matthias introduced a program of heavy public taxation, including taxes on the high nobility. He needed additional funds to pay for his magnificent lifestyle, his personal mercenary army (the Black Army), and his many wars of expansion. Because he had monopolized the salt, silver, and gold mines of Transylvania, Matthias's yearly revenue of one million forints (the Hungarian version of the florins) equaled the national budget of the English and French monarchs. His fiscal measures, which did not have Diet approval, almost cost him the crown when the Hungarian aristocracy invited Cazimir IV of Poland to replace Matthias. This, however, never happened.

Of all the various economic campaigns that played out in the Balkans, Prince Dracula's stands out most pronouncedly. Between 1459 and 1462, he and his cavalry struck against the Saxons of Transylvania who had mistreated his merchants and refused to pay taxes while crossing his Wallachian lands. Such lack of economic respect put thousands of arrogant Saxons in a bind, and their communities, decimated by the sword, were reduced to ashes. Thousands met their death on sharp stakes. Dracula refused to pay *haraci*/tribute to the Ottomans and attempted to regain control of the Lower Danube commercial route. He conducted a winter raid of the trading posts and garrisons along the river, the result of which was mass butchery and the impalement of Turks and their allies. In the end, more than fifty thousand people died because of Dracula's financially motivated raids. His devoted army was recruited from the royal "villages" he created on the estates of the enemy boyars whom he had murdered. These soldiers, who were tax-exempt, were rewarded with land and formed his new elite boyars. Still, Dracula's brief reign prevented the formation of a new social class in Wallachia.

Before the Ottoman occupation, kings were named by the powerful landlords who could either establish them on, or topple them from, the throne. The sultan appointed the rulers of the land, who were directly responsible for delivering the annual tribute to the Porte and providing military help to it. Such a puppet ruler was himself riddled with official debt due to the open bid for the throne and the untold amount of bribery needed if one were even to be allowed to bid. Once he took charge of a vassal nation, his financial exploitation reached absurd proportions as he asked villagers to pay taxes on the basis of the numbers of rooms and chimneys they had, the size of cellars, number of horses, oxen, and other domestic animals, etc., mounting to up to fifty different taxes. To avoid bankruptcy, the peasants and the merchants were forced to bribe the taxman; the word *bakshish* (tip) was added to the daily vocabulary in each language spoken in the Balkans. Because bribery was accepted as a normal way of life, it was impossible to enforce any law. Brigandage became

a glorified profession as highway robbers crossed the borders into and out of the empire's countries to sell their loot or to collect ransom.

The Ottoman occupation of the Balkan countries followed the Phanariot system as far as economic measures and taxation were concerned, thus perpetuating the Byzantine administration and the complicated bureaucracy of ruling a land foreign to the Turks. It was enforced by Turkish and Greek representatives, both of whom were fiscally corrupt beyond description. The pragmatic sultans never bothered to interfere in the domestic problems of vassal states, but when the puppet rulers defaulted with the annual tributes, an Ottoman official, usually a vizier, was sent to fire the leader in full view of his court. If one dared to rebel, like Prince Dracula (who refused to pay the ten thousand ducat annual *bir*/tribute), then a pasha or even the sultan himself led a punitive expedition to replace the troublemaker, usually killing him as a warning to others. Then the crown would be passed to another pro-Ottoman nobleman who promised to deliver the required tribute. This Phanariot procedure was adopted by all the great powers of Eastern Europe. It reached its epitome in Russia where each ruler's despotic ideas amplified the Balkanization system. So heavily ingrained was the Slavic culture and mentality that Russian society could never claim to belong either to Europe or Eastern Europe; instead it stayed true to its Asian roots.

To its credit, the Ottoman domination of Eastern Europe did have a positive impact on international commerce: there were no wars between the countries and therefore no interruption in the flow of goods and services along trade routes. As well as allowing this universal economy to flourish (one in which ethnicity meant little), the Ottomans recruited the best possible military commanders and functionaries from among the Christians, toward whom they proved extremely tolerant.

The promotional system fully applied to the Jews who took full advantage of it, filling the many economic roles that were greatly in demand. Typically their economic power in Western Europe was used to finance monarchies. Indeed, each prince seemed to have his own Jewish backer who generated the finances for public projects and wars. In 1257 King Bela IV, in his desperation to rebuild Hungary, granted legal economic status to the Jews and allowed them to have a say in the management of the royal finances. The result was the development of a thriving international commerce. The prosperity of Obuda/Buda enticed King Andrew III to move his court there, and the city of Pest, across the Danube, became a flourishing suburb.

Even though they were accepted for their financial prowess, old prejudices remained and drastically affected the Jews. When the Black Plague (1347–1352) killed more than twenty-five million people, Jewish traders were blamed for spreading it and some two hundred Jewish communities vanished

from Central Europe. Those who avoided these punitive massacres took refuge in hospitable Eastern Europe. After numerous expulsions from England, Portugal, Spain, and others countries, a mass Jewish migration again entered Eastern Europe—especially Poland. The latter was not affected by the plague because of its lack of good commercial roads, and so proved to be a haven for this dislocated population. Other Jewish traders and money lenders settled in the Byzantine Empire where they established an increasingly rich community in Thessaloniki; Saint Paul even mentions a synagogue in the city. A temporary Jewish expulsion from Hungary in the mid 1360s sent them to Bulgaria and Macedonia, the crossroads of main Byzantine commercial routes, and they settled in large numbers in Kastoria. Constantinople was, however, still managed by the Greeks, who traditionally had little tolerance for Jewish competition. Even there, though, the Jews were not forced into ghettos as they were in the West. After the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, the shrewd sultans used Jewish skills to rebuild the Ottoman economy and assigned them to the highest administrative and financial positions.

Besides the Jews and Armenians (Orthodox believers), Genovese and Venetians wanted to break into the Balkan markets and venture along the coastal areas of the Black Sea. They used their large and powerful fleet to help the Byzantine emperors fight the barbarians, and thus Latin merchants and money lenders gained a foothold in Constantinople. They became so rich and independent that they created their own colony of ten thousand in the district of Galata, only to face the loss of all their possessions in 1171 in an economic clash between East and West that resulted in the imprisonment of the Venetians and their massacre in 1182. Still, more than sixty thousand Italian merchants continued to do business in Constantinople. After 1204, the Latin Empire almost eliminated the obstinate rivalry of Greek counterparts, but, in spite of numerous setbacks, the Byzantines got the upper hand in any commercial competition against Western intruders. When the Ottomans took over Constantinople and the Balkans, it made no difference to the Phanar. It remained the heartland of the resourceful Greek entrepreneurs who were ever ready to switch their allegiances, serve any new master, and so enrich themselves. As always, bribery and corruption were their main secrets of success. The innate sense of how to arrange things and control situations from commerce to religion made the Greeks the brokers of the Balkans; it continued to increase their power as they represented the interests of the Sublime Porte in occupied Eastern Europe. In brief, the Phanariots emerged to dominate the Balkans politically and economically, as well as to control much of Eastern Europe, for the next five centuries.

It is difficult to draw a general conclusion, but when it comes to judging the actions of monarchs who captured thrones by means of treachery and

violence, it is clear that they proved to be above the law. Their behavior is what is behind the Balkan saying, “a fish rots from the head down”—aptly corroborated by the fact that their bad example set the tone for the rest of society. Their disregard for the law gave people tacit permission to behave in the same way; hence the laws that applied to the common people were hardly enforced. Because they were kept on their knees by the Orthodox Church and forced to bow to any authority, the submissive people of the Balkans nursed their instinct for revenge and allowed it to flare up whenever something triggered their innate sense of justice and pride. The overlap of the Byzantine and Turkish administrations, combined with the unfailing barbarian instincts for trickery, created societies with generationally entrenched bad habits. All of this came to be expressed by the term “Balkanization.” These behaviors and the social conditions that they engender have remained the norm to the present day in Eastern Europe.

NOTES

1. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed., Hans-Friedrich Mueller (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 1013.

2. Eventually the use of cannons caused castles to be built in a circular shape, so as to better deflect the projectiles.

3. The Vlachs are often perceived by historians as nomads because they roamed over large territories with their flocks, but that was the nature of their livelihood. In summer they allowed their huge herds to graze in the mountains; in winter they traveled to the Danubian fields or the warm southern area of the Balkans where this was still possible. For this reason, their population extended to most areas of the Balkans. Like the Native Americans of the United States, the Vlachs retained their distinct ethnic identity.

4. This was a bizarre assassination. Ivan trapped Vladimir by sending him a cross to show his harmless intentions. Vladimir traveled to meet his rival Ivan and went to a church to pray before the meeting. When he stepped out of the church, Vladimir was murdered on the steps. His grave became a site of miracles and pilgrimages.

5. Peter Arnott, *The Byzantines and Their World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 225.

6. Richard B. Lyttle, *Land Beyond the River: Europe in the Age of Migration* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 153.

7. Lyttle, *Land Beyond the River*, 154–155.

8. Antal Bartha, *Hungarian Society in the 9th and 10th Centuries* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975), 56.

9. John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 196–197.

10. Coins like the ban, the basilikon, and the ducat reflected the title of the ruler from whence they originated.

11. The brothers who revolted belonged to a wealthy boyar family of Vlach shepherds.

12. Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 257.

13. There were three main Wallachias/Vlachias: Wallachia Transalpina (Muntenia with Dobrudja and Oltenia), Moldovallachia/Black Wallachia (Moldavia between eastern Carpathians and Dniester/Nistru River), and Transylvania or Ardeal (Hungarian Wallachia (*sic*), including Maramures and Banat). In addition to these Romanian principalities which lie north of the Danube, other Wallachian entities are:

White Wallachia in Moesia/Bulgaria; Great Wallachia in the Thessalian Mountains; Upper Walahia in Epirus; Little Wallachia in Aetolia and Acarnania; Valachia of southern Macedonia between rivers Struma and Vardar; Mavrolachia/Morlachia on the coast of southern Dalmatia and Albania, which may have included Maior-Vlachia in southwestern Croatia and Sirmium Wallachia on the Sava River; Minor Valachia (Mala Vlasca) in western Slavonia; Old Valachia located in the valleys separating the mountains of Herzegovina and Montenegro; and Istro-Vlachia in the Istrian Peninsula. On the map of modern Czech Republic, in eastern Moravia there is a large area of Wallachia/Valassko, former Valassky/Moravian Wallachia, and pockets of Vlachs live in Hungary, Ukraine, Poland, Serbia, and many locations of Eastern Europe. In the eleventh century, the Byzantine author Kekaumenos described in his *Strategikon* manual that Vlachs were present in Thessaly and identified them with the Dacians living south of the Danube in the former Aurelian Dacia, evidently Moesia now occupied by the Bulgars. In the fifteenth century, historian L. Chalcocondyles mentioned in his *Historiarum Demonstrationes* that Vlachs from Northern Greece in the Pindus Mountains spoke the same Dacian language and were like the Dacians on the Ister/Danube River; evidently they were similar Vlachs who lived in Wallachia, Bulgaria and Serbia. But, in addition to the fact that some groups were separated (Aromanians, Megleno-Romanians) from the main community during the Age of Migration, many other Vlachs could be found all over the Balkans, as far north as Poland and as far west as the regions of Moravia (part of the modern Czech Republic), and the present-day Croatia. It was from there that the Morlachs gradually disappeared; also the Catholic and Orthodox Vlachs took Croat and Serb national identity. They reached these regions in search of better pastures, where the Wallachians were called Vlasi/Valaši by the Slavic peoples.

The Greeks considered them to be “wild mountain men” and called them *Vlachos*, which means “shepherds” but sounds like their word *Vlakos*, which means “idiot.” Despite this low opinion of them, the Vlachs would produce many of Greece’s poets, politicians, and other important figures.

Chapter Seven

Spiritual and Cultural Life

Spiritual and cultural life in the Byzantine Empire was rooted in Eastern Orthodox rites. The Byzantine Church was regarded as the body of Christ, and Orthodoxy claimed to possess a true understanding of Divinity. Spirituality meant following Jesus's example, i.e., a saintly life was one in which a person endured pain and injustice. Indeed, a life of misery was considered a virtuous life. To ensure that one would be saved, it was important to fear God's punishment, obey the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments), and observe the rules articulated by the Church. God's punishment for disobeying the church ranged from personal sickness and misfortunes to earthquakes, the Bubonic plague, Mongol invasions and the like. An anathema hung over believers, and the priests made sure to remind them of it. Through a deep devotion to prayer, fasting, and meditation, the body and soul could be healed; a better human would then emerge—one who was prepared to face the Last Judgment. The church teachings were as austere as its two-dimensional icons. They promoted blind obedience to the priest who led the church and the ruler who governed the land, both of whom were taken to be appointed by God. To be a good Orthodox Christian required that one must kneel to acquiesce to any authority and kiss its punishing hand. Thus the meek believed to live as God demanded and the resentful felt humiliated and angry. This submissiveness on the part of the population led to a double standard in ethics and morality, one that came to be a way of life.

The ancient nations of the Dacians, Greeks, Illyrians, Macedonians, and Thracians were mostly Christianized by the time of the barbarian invasions, but the Slavs brought paganism and *volkhvy*/shamans with them. They believed in sacred animals, mountains, trees, etc., and in gods named Dabog, Mokos, and Perun, among others. Their Stone Age religion suited the barbarians whose belief system was simple: have faith in something, pray to stay

healthy, make sure you have enough to eat, and avoid being killed. For them, there was no clear distinction between right and wrong, no such thing as guilt. This worked well for people who had little respect for human life. So for several centuries the Slav invaders retained their religion, since the very distant and invisible Christian God could not replace the worship of beautiful and “real” deities provided by Mother Nature.

Nevertheless, Orthodoxy was an inescapable fact of life in Eastern Europe, and monks were active missionaries. The Slavs (excepting the heavy traders, the Khazars, who converted to Judaism as early as 730) found themselves ever more attracted to the Byzantine religion. In their society, looting and trading were interchangeable, and brigands asking for ransom were at the same level as political negotiators. Even though this was a way of life for them, they looked around and began to think there might be a different, better world, one in which their survival was not constantly being threatened. Since they were curious and superstitious, the barbarians were attracted to the visual symbols of Christianity, and the cross made an appealing talisman that could be worn as a necklace or painted on a shield. Its message was easily understandable and moving to the barbarian mind. The pageantry of Orthodoxy with its intricate religious service was fascinating enough to entice the Slavic communities to listen to the Mass, even in Greek or Latin. They saw the Church as offering a secure afterlife in heaven in exchange for following certain simple rules that were beneficial for familial and social relationships. Furthermore, it was comforting to know that, in the eyes of the new God, everyone was equal. But most appealing to them were the rite of communion—bread and wine were luxury foods for the poverty stricken barbarians—and the festive Christian holiday celebrations meant free meals and drinks on days where no one worked.

Recognizing the importance of this pleasure aspect of Orthodoxy, Vladimir I (who was baptized after he married Princess Ana of Constantinople in 988) rejected Islam because it prohibited consumption of alcohol; “The Rus’ liked wine whether it was drunk at parties and meals or consumed as part of the communion service.”¹ Prince Vladimir was a pagan prince who killed his brother in a struggle for power, had seven wives and eight hundred concubines; he continued to carry out ritual human sacrifices even though his grandmother, Princess Olga, was a Christian (baptized in Constantinople since 957). But when a Byzantine monk showed him a painting of sinners burning in hell, the prince experienced an awakening and baptized himself. He used the sword to Christianize his subjects, and with their “donations” he built the magnificent Church of the Tithes. He routinely inaugurated Orthodox churches with lavish feasts, and since he believed that drinking was the joy of the Rus, he designated eight days of unending feasting to celebrate his

new church of the Transfiguration. The events transformed Russian pagans into Christians, and Vladimir was called the New Constantine. Old Church Slavonic, which copied the Greek liturgy, was adopted under his rule as well. Kiev became a renowned center of Orthodoxy for the Russians; its thriving Greek community supplied olive oil for the votive lamps, wine for communion, candles, icons, attire for priests, and other church related accoutrements. For their spiritual deeds and roles in the history of the Kievan Rus, the royal Olga and Vladimir were sanctified.

The conversion of the barbarians came about neither because they feared eternal damnation or believed that Jesus would save them from hell, nor because they understood the meaning of gospel, were eager to adopt a new faith, and wanted to be baptized. Rather, their leaders were aware of the political advantages to be had from it and so imposed it upon their subjects: first, the tribes would be united and fortified under the same religion; second, the Christian blessing would allow them to hold on to their thrones; and third, they and their people would be socially elevated to the level of the Byzantines. Those rulers who shared this crucial wisdom were: Prince Viseslav of Croatia, who became a Christian in 800 even though his nation is reputed to have begun converting to Orthodoxy in 751; Prince Mojmir in 822 and then Prince Ratislav of Moravia in 862 converted to Christianity; Khan Boris, who changed his name to Mihail/Michael and baptized the Bulgarians in 864; Knez Mutimir, who Christianized the Serbs around 870; Mieszko I of Poland, who was baptized in 966; and Istvan/Stephen, who was crowned by the pope as the Christian King of Hungary in 1000 (and would later be canonized). All of these leaders became merciless protagonists of the new religion. Furthermore, Boris, the opportunist, declared the Bulgarian Church to be independent of Rome and Constantinople. But the old gods died hard in the pagan population, and he simply massacred those of his own people who refused baptism. Christianity had come a long way since the era when some outraged pagan Magyars forced a Venetian missionary into a barrel lined with spikes and rolled him into the Danube to quiet his preaching. The Duke of Bohemia, Wenceslaus I, was responsible for turning the Czechs into a Christian nation. He became a martyr after his younger brother conspired with pagan nobility and in 935 murdered him on his way to the church. Wenceslaus was canonized, and he became the patron saint of the Czech nation.

Divine revelations changed the spiritual lives of many rulers, and their sacred missions were later glorified. The Hungarian legend about divine intervention in the creation of the Arpad dynasty (896–1301) begins with Almos's mother who dreamed that she had been impregnated by a mythical falcon and that her son, grandchildren, and great grandchildren would become masters of distant lands. Giving credence to this revelation, her

grandson Arpad united with and led the Magyar tribes to Pannonia, where the Hungarians maintained their base as they persisted in their efforts to occupy other nations. Arpad and six other members of his family were canonized or beatified by the Catholic Church. According to another legend, when Prince Jovan Vladimir was imprisoned after a battle, he had a dream that predicted his future. An angel appeared and told him he would be freed, but that he would die a martyr. Indeed, he was beheaded in 1016 on the church steps in Prespa by an adversary; shortly thereafter he was sanctified. He was the first Serbian saint to be depicted holding his head in one hand and the cross with a palm leaf in the other. A monastery was built in his name in Albania. When Prince Stefan Nemanja was imprisoned in a cave by his brothers, it was said that Saint George freed him. He commemorated this miracle in 1171 when he built the Church of Durdevi Stupovi/Pillars of St. George, the Monastery of Saint Nicholas in Kuršumljia, the Monastery of the Holy Mother of Christ near Kosanica-Toplica, and others; in 1190 he completed construction of the Temple of the Immaculate Holy Virgin the Benefactor, and from that time on, the Nemanja dynasty was considered to have been blessed by God. He died at age 86 in front of the magic icon of Virgin Hodegetria (She Who Shows the Way). According to legend, holy oil seeped out of his tomb; because of this and other miracles that occurred over his dead body, he was canonized in 1200, one year after his death.

King Milutin (r. 1282–1321) achieved sainthood in a very different manner. He was married several times, including, at one time, to a five year-old Byzantine princess, and his life was full of sinful events. Yet, he made restitution for this by making Serbia a great power and by building some forty churches and monasteries; among these are Bogorodica Ljeviska Church (1309), King's Church of Studenica (1315), and the Hilandar Monastery on Mount Altos, all of which feature portraits of him on their walls. He redefined Serbian architecture with the building of the Gracanica Monastery in Kosovo in 1321, which displays the last image made of him. Stefan Uros IV, whose military invasions into the heart of the Byzantine Empire brought Serbia its largest borders, was canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church despite the fact that this mighty ruler dethroned his father by strangulation and killed his half brother in battle. His father is buried in the Visoki Decani Monastery in Kosovo (which they both built), and he was laid to rest inside the Monastery of the Holy Archangels (which he built) near Prizren; it was later destroyed by the Turks. His son King Stefan Uros V, nicknamed "the Weak," was a gentle ruler who suffered numerous betrayals, including at the hands of his mother, uncle, and members of the nobility, until he lost his father's great Serbian Empire. He died in 1371, but his good nature and noble soul triumphed in the end—he was canonized two centuries after his death.

For Balkan rulers, it seemed that building new churches meant more than providing a place of worship for their subjects; it was also a way of salving their guilty consciences, diminishing the guilt they had incurred because of the suffering they had wrought upon so many people. “Build a church and save your soul” seemed to be the royal mantra. Orthodox churches were simple structures, unadorned except for wall paintings that illustrated the Bible for illiterate worshippers. In this they stood in direct contrast to Catholic Churches with their elaborate decorations, including statues, magnificent colorful stained glass, rose windows, and complex organ music. Many Orthodox mural paintings show pious kings holding a miniature of the church they built as a testimony of their sacred charity. They endowed the churches with large estates and filled many of the villages with serfs, who felt blessed to be there in spite of the fact that they were slaves to an unscrupulous priest or abbot. Tyrants viewed it as a sort of mission to pay for their sins by giving gifts to the Church. Often in their correspondence they appended to their names such phrases as “by the grace of God,” thus demonstrating the approval of the Almighty of their status as His understudy on earth. When they approached old age, many of them became very spiritual; they retired to, and often were buried in, the monasteries they had built. These burials marked and led to the construction of new shrines for the next generations. They would then be worshipping sanctified rulers who had once been more feared than the devil.

North of the Danube River, the Wallachians had been Christianized since Roman times, and their faith was kept alive by their voievodes/princes who rendered homage to God by building churches and monasteries. This anchored the spirituality of the Romanians. It transformed the landscape of the country and defined its social order. A church built in 1215 by Prince Radu the Black in Wallachia led to the founding of his first capital at Campulung. By building the Church of Saint Nicholas (in a true Byzantine style) at Curtea de Arges, Prince Basarab I (r. 1310–1352) established the second capital of Wallachia. At the same time, a small wooden church built by the Wallachian shepherds in the vast Danubian plain developed into a trade center; later, in 1461, Prince Dracula completed construction of the Snagov Monastery there and moved his capital to the location of today’s Bucharest. In Moldavia, Stefan the Great (r. 1457–1504) was known for his devotion to Orthodoxy, and it was said that after each of his thirty-four victories (out of thirty-six battles), he built a church to demonstrate his gratitude to God. His successful commitment to fight the invading Turks led Pope Sixtus IV to name him *Athleta Christi*/Champion of Christ. Among his living legacies are the Putna Monastery, where he was buried in 1504, and the Voronet Monastery, which marked his victory against the Turks at Vaslui; it features a masterful mural painting that he dedicated to Saint George. Communities whose names are

rooted in monasticism, such as Calugareni (of the monks), Chilia (monk cell), Manastirea (monastery), Schitu (hermitage), and many others, are still to be found in Romania.

By happenstance, this same Saint George was the patron of the Vlach shepherds living south of the Danube River. They used a Romanian dialect to celebrate their mass. All across the Balkan Peninsula, they were the strongest ethnicity within the Orthodox faith during the barbarian invasions. Their spirituality was anchored in the holy site of Mount Athos off the peninsular east coast of Greece. It was inhabited by thousands of monks who needed supplies from the Vlachs. The Asan brothers claimed divine inspiration for their anti-Byzantine revolt from St. Dumitru/Dimitri/Demetrius, and only after they built a church in his name were the Vlachs convinced to follow them; they subsequently built the Second Bulgarian Empire. This Vlachian-Greek spiritual connection was maintained indefinitely, and most likely Grigore Palamas/Grigorie Palama (1296–1359), Archbishop of Thessaloniki, was of Vlach origin; his strong attachment to the Vlachian born Nicodemus/Nicodim (1320–1406), the spiritual adviser of Prince Mircea the Elder (r. 1386–1418), indicates that they were of the same ethnic origin. With a generous grant from the Wallachian prince, Nicodemus was involved in the construction of many churches; he was sanctified as Nicodemus of Tismana, after the famous monastery (the other was Voditsa Monastery) he founded in Wallachia. His ties with Patriarch Eftimie of Tarnovo (Bulgaria) led to the exclusive calligraphic production of Slavonic versions of the Tetraevangelh (Four Gospels). Eftimie was also sanctified, and the spiritual work of the two united the Vlachs from north and south of the Danube. They also shared the same traditional rites.

One of these rites took place on January 6 of each year, in conjunction with a celebration of the Epiphany: a synod of priests tossed a cross into an icy cold river, and young men competed to find the holy object. Splendid carols for Christmas, New Year's Day, and other holidays, appealed for fertility, health, and a rich harvest. The carol *steaaua*/the magic star was dedicated to the birth of Jesus, and the story of how he was discovered by the magi was recounted. The northern Wallachians diligently included the Daco-Roman traditions in their celebrations of Christian holidays, among them, *plugusorul*/"plowing carol" on New Year's Day to encourage a good harvest in the year to come. This involved cracking whips, jingling bells (to keep evil spirits away), and cutting a furrow in the snow, all of which were accompanied by song. Shouts of encouragement ended each verse, invoking Emperor Trajan (r. 98–117), former occupier of Transylvania,² as their leading farmer. Other caroling consisted of well-wishing chants accompanied by gentle touches with *sorcova*, or branches decorated with colorful flowers and ribbons (like a long wreath with a handle) and held by young children. A traditional Wallachian ritual

practiced north and south of the Danube was the Holy Saturday midnight celebration. It involved a walk around the church during which everyone sang about Christ having risen from death; they then cracked colored eggs, all the while reciting the same verses, and eating lamb as part of a feast. As far as daily life was concerned, each Orthodox family would pray in its own house kneeling in front of an icon, that of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus being most popular; it was usually adorned with a hanging embroidered scarf on top and a votive lamp underneath and always placed on an east wall.

Spirituality was not only connected to traditions like those described above, but also reflected in the ways people ate and socialized, from joyful feasts that celebrated church patrons, to Christmas and Easter holidays, and to funeral feasts, when *kollyva*, a special porridge of boiled wheat with honey and nuts, was served in memory of the dead; all of these celebrations were carried out in keeping with Church regulations. A thanksgiving prayer was recited by a priest who also sprinkled *ayazma*/holy water (from the Greek word *hagiasme*) to bless any food offerings. There were no weddings or other festivities during Lent, Christmas, Easter, or other periods of abstinence, when basically only non-animal products could be eaten, with the exception of fish, which was allowed on a few days in order to re-supply protein. Because Orthodoxy had strict dietary rules, almost half of the year was designated for meat-free meals, and on Wednesdays and Fridays cheese and eggs were also forbidden; the church prohibited alcohol consumption on all of the days preceding its holidays.

Christianity could, however, not eliminate age-old superstitions: beware the evil eye of envy; an itchy left hand meant money would be received; the right hand, money would be given away; ringing in the right ear, good news would be heard; breaking a dish was a sign of good luck; socks or other clothing worn inside out brought bad luck; a black cat crossing the road was an omen, while a rooster singing in front of the door forecasted unexpected guests. A cross as a necklace was considered the ultimate good luck talisman, and even the Turks would not touch women who wore one. For the Turks sneezing calls for a blessing—"may Allah have mercy upon you!" It was not only the commoners who were superstitious. Czar Simeon of Bulgaria visited Emperor Romanus I in 924 to discuss tax issues between the two states. While they were looking out on the waters of the Golden Horn, they saw two eagles flying overhead, one going northward and the other heading over Constantinople. This clearly indicated to both of them that negotiations were futile. In fact, only Simeon's sudden death saved Constantinople from another Bulgarian siege based on economic friction. When Murad II laid siege to Constantinople in 1421, the Byzantine defenders credited their successful resistance to the vision of Virgin Mary who saved the city by leading the sultan and his army off to a more important campaign in Asia Minor.

Religion typically shapes the functioning of both individuals and societies, and this was certainly the case in the Balkans. The Orthodox Church was a vast and complicated institution with a hierarchy based on nepotism and patronage; its leaders were politically involved at all levels of government. Unlike Catholicism where the pope appointed the heads of state, in Eastern Europe the autocratic rulers named the Church leaders. They were subsequently totally submissive to their emperors or kings. The servants of Orthodoxy were first of all servants to whomever held the throne and wielded political power. This system encouraged corruption among clerics who sought to advance themselves; it also inspired the common people to follow their example. The ordinary priests were the foot soldiers of the church, as they officiated at all religious rites from praying the liturgy and hearing confessions to performing baptisms and conducting funerals. The faithful invested unlimited respect and trust in them. Yet, while they promoted the values taught in the gospel, many lived lives that were contrary to their preaching—to the teaching that urged love and equality among all people and espoused poverty as a virtue. Although they belonged to the privileged all-male echelon of society, they fought bitterly amongst each other, competing for the wealthiest parishes; there was no limit to how rich and arrogant they could be. Unlike in the West where priests could not marry and had to leave all of their accumulated wealth to the church, the Orthodox priest passed his possessions on to his children. At least one of his sons was expected to continue the family tradition and, ideally, increase the family's wealth. This kind of behavior produced the saying “do what the priest says, not what he does”; it also gave new meaning to the word “demagogue”—its original, ancient meaning having been downgraded from that of a real leader of the people to someone who is dishonest and tyrannical.

Certainly this applied to life under Czar Peter I (r. 927–969), when Bulgarian monks and priests were known to be continually drunk and fornicating; those who were entrepreneurial left their monasteries and churches and became tyrannical landlords on the estates donated to the church by Peter. Corruption was rampant in the church and it triggered the *Bogomil* (Dear to God) movement, considered heretical by the Byzantines. In the West, its followers were named Bulgari; they believed that God had a good son (Jesus) and an evil one (Satan), each of whom had his own eternal domain. Generally, the Bulgari refused to pay taxes to the landlord or do free work for anyone; they also dodged military duty, since all of these types of obligations were manmade and not divine. In spite of all this, however, Peter was sanctified, while most of the Bogomil adepts converted to Mohammedanism, the new religion of the invading Turks.

The Ottoman invasion of Anatolia and the Balkans introduced the religion of Islam that proclaimed “there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed (Highly

Praised) is his prophet.” With it came *jihad* /holy war against Christians who were regarded as Infidels. This new religious movement was initiated by Mohammed (570–632), a prophet, who, like Jesus, was illiterate but knew how to speak to people who had fallen away from other religions. Islam proved most successful in uniting the Turk and other tribes under the crescent flag and the battle cry, *Allahu Akbar*/Allah is Great! A series of capable chieftains used the Muslim bible, the Koran, to discipline their warriors, who were told that fighting and dying for the cause of Allah brought immediate entry in his paradise. That promise led them to military superpowerdom—an extraordinary achievement for these desert nomads who believed that the first human was created after Allah breathed his spirit into Adam (causing him to sneeze) and that their sultan was the shadow of God on earth. To them there was only one God in the universe, and they rejected Christianity with its concept of the Trinity as being a polytheistic religion, little different from paganism. This kept the two kinds of religions apart. Islam did not concern the Greek prelates whose only aim was for Constantinople to be more powerful than Rome. They sought ever more political and religious control in an effort to fight the Catholics, and, when they concluded that it was better to accept the Turkish fez rather than the pope’s tiara, the Greeks received just that after the fall of Constantinople. Indeed, they had scarcely defended the city. Under the Turks, the Phanariots, wealthy Greeks from Constantinople, continued to dominate Eastern Orthodoxy; in the case of the Romanian principalities where they owned large church estates, they mercilessly exploited the serfs and pocketed most of the profits intended for Mount Athos (Holy Mountain), the sacred ground of Orthodoxy:

Thus Athos was a major source for the spread of manuscripts, texts, and theological ideas, as texts were copied and translated on the mountain and then carried back to the different Orthodox lands. Athos was also the source from which the Slavs drew ideas about Church law and Church organization. For example...Byzantine Canon Law was to reach Serbia via Athos. Athos was also a center from which various political ideas and Byzantine secular legal texts spread to the Orthodox world.³

In the Byzantine Empire and Eastern Europe, the Orthodox Church ruled supreme and went largely unchallenged by its intimidated kneeling believers. However, by contrast, in Bohemia the Catholic Church was confronted by Jan Hus. In 1404, he began a movement against its secular power and wealth. The protest rallied followers from every social strata of the Czech population; they revolted against the Church and its main supporters, the ethnic Germans, who subsequently moved their university from Prague to Leipzig. In 1414, Hus was trapped in the city of Constance and sentenced to death for his he-

retical ideas; one year later, he was burned at the stake. His close associate, Jerome of Prague, suffered the same fate. This led to an uprising on the part of the Hussites who demanded religious reforms. Five “crusades” failed to subdue them. Eventually, in 1436, Emperor Sigismund negotiated with them, and the Hussite rebels elected their own king. Given its limited military force, the Czech rebellion ended under the Hungarian and Polish rulers. Still, the movement achieved a significant spiritual and economic victory against Catholicism. On the other hand, the Croatians, Hungarians, and Poles cherished Catholicism and used it to advance their societies and bring them closer to the spiritual and cultural life of Western Europe. No such religious uprising was possible in the context of the Orthodox Church, which ruled the populace with an iron fist. Occasionally, some Orthodox monarchs and nations sought to depend less on Constantinople’s domination out of a sense of pride, and “national churches” of Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia severed their connections to the Greek Church. As in the Byzantine Empire, religious prestige was second to military might, both enforcing a hierarchal society, and it remained so, unsurpassed by any changes of time for every nation.

The culture of Eastern Europe was vastly different from that of the rest of Europe even though the great Hellenic traditions had established the standards of the Western culture, which by this point combined Homeric literature and classical philosophy with a Roman-influenced Latin enlightenment. The Greeks proved to be a people who had the strength to endure. Roman occupation did very little to change the Greek character; to the contrary, Greek art and civilization came to dominate Rome and its immense empire. After the fall of Rome, that cultural legacy was transferred to the Eastern Roman Empire, now referred to by the Greeks as *Basileia ton Rhōmaiōn*/The Empire of the Romans. This unlikely title was motivated by the fact that tremendous political and military might were still associated with Rome, automatically implying civilization and western power. To keep up with that image, the people of Byzantium, now referred to as Constantinople (Nova Roma/the New Rome), called themselves Romaioi/Romans. But, in spite of the fact that Latin initially was the official language of the Empire, the Greeks continued to speak their mother tongue, the language of Plato and Aristotle. Art and culture were distinctively Greek achievements. During the Dark Ages, the Byzantine Empire was superior to any other European civilization and was better administrated and ruled than Anglo-Saxon, French, German, and Italian lands. However, in Europe, civilization was interchangeable with Christianity. Unfortunately, the Greek lands were continually plagued by barbarian invasions, and when the Eurasians arrived in the Balkans, their plundering directly affected the Byzantine culture and modified its established patterns

in negative ways. Basically, for the Byzantines, like the Romans before them, any people who did not wear sandals and togas, who could not make olive oil and cover their houses with red tiles, were barbarians. And, the farther they lived from Greece, the less civilized they were thought to be; the many groups that settled within the empire were considered to be as simple as the steppes from which they came. And, the more primitive their beliefs were, the more tenaciously they seemed to cling to them.

Little is known about the culture of the distant eastern Slavs, but when the Russians attacked Constantinople, Patriarch Photius characterized them as:

A nation dwelling somewhere far from our country, barbarous, nomadic, armed with arrogance, unwatched, unchallenged, leaderless, has so suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, like a wave of the sea, poured over our frontiers, and as a wild boar has devoured the inhabitants of the land like grass, or straw, or a crop...sparing nothing from man to beast...but boldly thrusting their sword through persons of every age and sex.⁴

A much milder image was presented by the chronicler Nestor, a monk from twelfth century Kiev. He described them as farmers and herders sporting bowl-shaped haircuts. The Kievan Rus men shaved their heads leaving a lock of hair on top and used a basinet to wash their hands before dinner. They were raiders who lived off what they pillaged from others, and they shared their loot with the Jewish Khazars. Most Slavs arrived in the Balkans having already experienced slavery and abuse at the hands of still more powerful barbarians; they therefore had little problem adjusting to the manorial system and becoming obedient serfs.

The Bulgars, however, were a different lot. Khan Krum (r. 803–814) led them against the Byzantines. He was so victorious that he caused three emperors to be dethroned, two of whom were assassinated. Emperor Nikephoros was killed in a battle, and in July 813 Bulgarian armies besieged Constantinople in order to force Emperor Leo V to sign a pact with Krum. He was busy astonishing the defenders of the city with animal and human sacrifices, parading his concubines, and sprinkling his soldiers with sea water he had personally sanctified. Since he was fully aware that he could not conquer the city, Krum agreed to a compromise and asked the emperor to allow him to stick his lance in the Golden Gate as a sign of barbarian triumph. When his request was refused, he led his troops in a devastating pillage around Constantinople. After a few days, he returned with another proposal: he would stop the carnage if he were handed a huge amount of gold and the most attractive young women in the city. Leo again refused, but countered with a proposed truce. A meeting with Krum took place in a no-man's land. At a critical point, Krum sensed danger and darted away on his horse while his companions were

hacked to death by Leo's concealed bodyguards. The revenge of the khan was proportionate to this insult: the Bulgars decimated the villages and lands outside of Constantinople's walls, looting even the churches and monasteries and also one of the imperial palaces; after this, they set fires that reduced everything to ruins. Nearly everyone living in these areas was slaughtered. All the marble columns, magnificent doors, furniture, art objects, and the craftsmen who could make them were taken to Krum's capital at Pliska where he built a dazzling palace of his own. The whole event, from proposals for peace to vengeful retribution, was typical of the sort of "cultural exchange" that routinely took place between barbarians and Byzantines.

Over time, a process of cultural osmosis took place between newly formed nations who admired the imperial glamour of Constantinople and envied it, and, at the same time, tried to destroy it. Byzantine culture affected all who came into contact with it, but the undisciplined barbarians could absorb only so much; basically it was easier to follow bad examples than to try to understand and relate to the sophisticated thinking behind Hellenic ideals. By the end of the twelfth century, Byzantine culture had advanced beyond that of the rest of Europe. In addition to creating private schools, Constantine IX founded public academies of law and philosophy, and Alexius I advanced theological studies. When rabbi Benjamin of Tudela visited Constantinople around 1170 he wrote with amazement:

The Greeks who inhabit the country are extremely rich and possess great wealth of gold and precious stones. They dress in garments of silk, ornamented by gold and other valuable materials; they ride upon horses, and in their appearance they are like princes. The country is rich, producing all sorts of delicacies, as well as abundance of bread, meat and wine, and nothing on earth equals their wealth. They are well skilled in the Greek sciences and live comfortably, 'every man under his vine and his fig tree.'⁵

Indeed, Constantinople was still the city of lights with paved streets; its one million inhabitants enjoyed a rich cultural life. But, the other side of the coin was less glittering: the Byzantines continued to be beset by problems with the barbarians who did not fit into this cultural climate. The Serbians are a case in point. William, Archbishop of Tyre and chronicler of the Crusades of 1179, described the "rebellious Serbs" under Prince Stefan Nemanja as "an uneducated people, lacking discipline, living in mountains and forests, unskilled in agriculture. They are rich in herds and flocks and unusually well supplied with milk, cheese, butter, meat, honey and wax."⁶ Nemanja himself lived a rustic life and preferred to sleep on the floor.

The only rapid transformation that occurred in the barbarian culture was with respect to language, and this either separated or united groups of people.

Upon their arrival in the Balkans, the Bulgars and Serbs spoke their own languages, but the overwhelming number of Antes and Slaveni made theirs dominant; it became known as the Slavic language. This dynamic led to the Bulgars and Serbs also being called Slavs, in addition to the Macedonians and other ethnic groups, after their lands were invaded by the barbarians. Once again, superiority in numbers and the force of weapons dictated membership in a culture. Still, the Byzantines had a significant cultural impact on local cultures, especially where religion was concerned.

Parallel to the Slavicization of the Balkans, the language of the Byzantine Church changed when Emperor Heraclius halted the use of Latin in 630. The result was that refined, Hellenistic Greek came to be used in documents, while its vulgar dialect spread throughout the empire and competed with the Slavic language. The latter was a disadvantage because there was no way of writing Slavic sounds, no Slavic alphabet to convey its unique phonetics, which were non-existent in Greek or Latin. However, such an alphabet became a reality in the 860s. Two monks who were brothers—Cyril-Constantine (c. 827–869) and Methodius (c. 825–885) of Thessaloniki—not only spoke the Slavic language but had also mastered Greek and Latin; Constantine was additionally competent in Arabic, Hebrew, and others. They used Greek letters and added signs to them to accommodate the written needs of spoken Slavic, thus inventing the Glagolitic alphabet. This became the foundation for the Cyrillic alphabet, and the church retained the new Slavonic writing.

The process of Slavicization was vehemently condemned by the popes of the time who declared that only Latin, Greek, and Hebrew were fit for the liturgy. But Constantine and Methodius translated the Bible into Slavonic, using this new alphabet, an act which brought lasting legitimacy to the Slavic language; it began to be used in churches. This meant that the liturgy could be conducted in a language that the common people understood. Subsequently, it became the official spoken and written language of most of the Balkans and was approved by Constantinople as the fourth language of the church; ironically, the Slavic languages outlasted Latin. But perhaps equally importantly, this was the first step in spreading the Byzantine culture into the Slav world, as it was adopted by the non-Slavic Macedonians; it also migrated into the Catholic Balkans and the Latin speaking Romanian principalities.⁷ Constantine, who was now called Cyril, and Methodius became apostles in their own right, and a generation of disciples continued their work, both with the alphabet and with evangelization. For their legacy of enlightenment and their role in strengthening Christianity in the Slavic world, the two holy brothers were sanctified and are still honored in the Balkans.⁸

In 893, the Slavic language became the official language of the Bulgarians. The Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets made it possible for the Slavs to write

their own literature, which initially focused on religious subjects. In 1189, Prince Miroslav of the Hum (modern Bosnia) put Slavic literature on the cultural map with *Miroslav's Gospel*, a book that contained masterful calligraphic illustrations.⁹

While many Balkan ethnicities adopted the Slavic language, focusing on Old Church Slavonic, and so established a certain cultural pattern, the Vlachs did not. They had a longer history in the Balkans and their language reinforced and helped maintain their ethnic identity. As mountain people with skills needed to survive, they had never had to migrate from their lands, for the barbarians of the steppes did not venture into areas which were either densely forested areas or located at high altitudes. Even though they were now split into large pockets by the invaders, they remained strongly united by their Daco-Roman language (like Hebrew for the Jews in the Diaspora). It caused them to be identified somewhat differently in various parts of the Balkans in which they lived: "The Romance-speaking people who are called Vlachs south of the Danube came to be called Romanians north of the Danube, though all are closely related to each other."¹⁰ The Albanians referred to the Vlachs as *rămăni*, *rumăni*, and *rommăni*; Greeks called them *rumân*, *arumâni*, and *armâni* or Rhomanoi. They formed an independent Great Wallachia in parts of Macedonia and the Pindus Mountains in Albania and Greece (in Thessaly); Lesser Wallachia was located in Aetolia and Acarnania in west central Greece, and Upper Wallachia was in Epirus. Hungarians named them *olah*, and the Turks acknowledged them as *ciobani*, which in Romanian means shepherds, this being their main occupation and source of trade.¹¹

The Vlachian language was, in fact, spoken across the Balkans. Historian Niketas provided invaluable documentation on the Vlachian population inside the Byzantine Empire when he described their King Asan who spoke "the language of the Vlachs,"¹² an offshoot of the Vulgar Latin and Dacian language.¹³ Further evidence of this is provided by Pope Innocent III, who, in 1199 talked about the "Roman descent" of King Asan, which implied that his language was related to Latin. The pope did not want to name Ioannitsa emperor, because his title was in conflict with the Latin emperor from Constantinople. His new state was known as the Bulgarian Empire because the Bulgars, who lived alongside the Vlachs, were the most despised enemies of the Byzantines. What drew Romanians into the Slavic camp was the replacement of their Latin liturgy with the Old Church Slavonic. Thereafter it was assumed that they shared the same culture with the Slavs.

It took many centuries for the barbarian invaders with their primitive culture and pagan religion to relate to the Byzantine world of arts and its sophisticated civilization. That happened through different venues, mostly via tradesmen who brought from Constantinople and other imperial cities art

objects made of porcelain and refined metals, jewelry, utilitarian objects, and most importantly, silk clothing, intricately and ornately engraved weapons, and illustrated manuscripts. In many instances, Byzantinism was introduced by students and freed hostages. Most of the students were the offspring of wealthy or princely families, sent by their parents to Constantinople to be educated or initiated into the secrets of leadership. They came into contact with the great scholars of the empire, learned manners from their tutors, and closely observed the royal rituals, which seems to have been what impressed them the most. When they got back to their barbarian lands, they transplanted their newly acquired knowledge by the force of the sword. The would-be Czar Simeon I lived for ten years in Constantinople and returned in 888 a changed person; his people called him “Half-Greek.” He understood the need for a higher culture in Bulgaria and so promoted Byzantinism there wholeheartedly. Even though most Bulgars were illiterate, he was the patron of the disciples of Cyril and Methodius. Using the Cyrillic alphabet, they translated the Bible and many literary works from Greek into Bulgarian. In an attempt to duplicate the brilliance of Constantinople on a smaller scale, Simeon beautified his new capital at Preslav with some twenty churches and a glorious cathedral. He created his own aristocracy and military nobility also modeled on the pomp and circumstance of the Byzantine elite; commoners in his land, however, still lived in their steppe society.

Two would-be Serbian kings also lived in Constantinople for a period of time. Their contacts there launched them to the thrones of their own country. Stefan Nemanja used his year in “prison” in Constantinople (1172–1173) to educate himself by befriending Emperor Manuel; the latter became his mentor. As a young man, Stefan Dusan (who would make and enforce a universal system of laws inspired by the Byzantines) spent six years in Constantinople (1314–1320) where his father and mother had been exiled. While he was there, he learned to appreciate the arts and royal life, elements of which he later tried to introduce into Serbian culture. Similarly, the would-be King Bela III lived in Constantinople prior to 1172 and assimilated so much of life there that he assumed he would succeed Emperor Manuel I on the throne. Instead, he was sent by the emperor back to Hungary where he became so estranged from his own people (he changed his name to Alexius, became the emperor’s brother-in-law, and fought alongside the Byzantine army against his countrymen) that even his mother did not want him as a king. It was to be expected that rulers such as these, who had absorbed so much of the Byzantine culture, would enforce cultural and social changes in their realms, including the manners at their courts.

All of these embellishments were overlaid on the pre-literate Balkan culture of the earlier Middle Ages. An oral literature was in place, inspired by

a rich variety of epics about past national heroes, fairytales for adults and children, and jokes and witty stories containing moral lessons. Usually the greatest folk heroes of each nation were mythologized (many of them were sanctified) and glorified for their memorable acts. It was said that Prince Radu Negru (Radu the Black/Vlach) dismounted his horse and his foot prints remained in stone to commemorate the establishment of Wallachia and his capital at Campulung in 1290. Almost two centuries later, the orally transmitted legends of Prince Vlad the Impaler, the stories of the cruel punishments he inflicted on his enemies, crossed the borders of Wallachia and were later immortalized in German, Russian, and Turkish writings. The Serbians' Czar Lazar, who in 1389 died heroically fighting the Turks at Kosovo, and his knight Miloš Obilić, who assassinated Sultan Murad I, also produced epic folklore, as did the Albanian Skandenberg, who was undefeated by the Ottomans. Since heroes and idols live beyond their place and time, their stories were versified and became folk songs, and many were sung by minstrels to entertain royal courts in the west.

The most enduring cultural institution of the Balkans was the monastery where monks lived in seclusion from the rest of the world. In the Catholic world, churches were seldom fortified, but in the lands of Orthodoxy they were often enclosed by walls—a fortified compound built around a church. The area surrounding the monastery contained living quarters for monks and self-sustaining facilities. Overall, the establishment was an oasis of spirituality and a place of refuge—when danger arose, people living outside could rush in for shelter. To ensure inaccessibility, many monasteries were built on top of cliffs and mountain spurs with vertical walls, at heights that prohibited ingress of potential attackers, who were most often equestrian barbarians from the flatlands. The mountainous and rocky landscape of the Balkans, especially Greece, abounded with “eagle’s nest” monastic establishments that garnered respect in the past and continue to dazzle modern visitors; they seem to be located close to heaven, and their dramatic architecture blends with the environment. Because monks were well schooled, the monastery proved to be the fertile ground for the development of culture, it included a *scriptorium* or room for scribes who prepared calligraphic manuscripts on parchment (animal skin) and later on paper, made translations, painted icons, and in later years, handled the printing presses. Such monastic activities caused the arts to spread throughout the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Byzantine monks were skilled at penmanship and book binding, artistically decorating covers with carved silver, gold, and ivory. Before the invention of the printing press, they used colorful hand drawings to illustrate texts that depicted the lives of the saints and emphasized the difference between good

and evil, and heaven and hell. Gold leaf and gold inlays embellished the intricate floral designs and miniature illustrations. Their artistic endeavors served as examples throughout Eastern Europe. Laic manuscripts also abounded as emperors wanted to leave written proof of their legacy. Writers close to them, such as Niketas Choniates and Anna Comnena, excelled in documenting the Byzantine history of the twelfth century and producing informative works about the cultural and spiritual life of their times. Like many other manuscripts, theirs were written in Greek, the pre-eminent language in the Byzantine Empire. Some forty thousand handwritten manuscripts survived, primarily because they were stored safely in monasteries. Over time, the Slavic monks, especially those who were Bulgars and Serbs, proved themselves equal in talent, if not more so, than the Byzantines, and they greatly influenced their northern cousins in the more rustic Russian culture.

The ways in which people feed themselves is also a part of culture. There was a certain wisdom in Kievan Prince Vladimir's saying that the best way to change people's thinking was through their stomachs. The barbarians carried chunks of raw meat under their horses' saddles, where it was marinated by horse perspiration. The Byzantines inherited much of their culinary sophistication from the Romans. But the ethnic dishes of the commoners reflected their ingenuity in cooking meals with harvested vegetables and every part of a slaughtered animal. Nationalities had specific dishes, often named after them, such as *Szekely Gulyas* (Hungarian goulash) which combined whatever greens and herbs the nomads found in the land in which they traveled with horse meat, all mixed and stewed in a cauldron above the campfire. Basic to the Russian diet was a *kasha* (stew) of boiled groats (triangular seed-like whole grains from various cereals) with salted fish and mushrooms—or anything else they could find to improve the taste of this filling and easily prepared dish; it went well with *kvass*, a drink brewed from bread crumbs, later upgraded to *vodka* made from grain. In addition to using readily available seafood in their cuisine, the Greeks perfected *souvlakia*, pieces of lamb or mutton seasoned with salt and pepper and skewered with cut vegetables, all of which were brushed with olive oil while broiling. The Romanians cooked *ghivetch*, mixed vegetables gently fried in lard and left to simmer in a covered pot, to which pieces of meat could be added. The Vlachs, most of them shepherds, included all varieties of cheese in their cooking, especial *telemea* (the Greek *feta*). As nothing could be wasted, Bulgarians made tripe soup, Albanians honored special guests with a baked sheep's head, and Bohemians and Czechs served pierogi (boiled dumplings stuffed with whatever was available) as a festive dish. The Serbs specialized in bean soup, the Bosnian meal *cevapi*; and Macedonians, in *tavche-gravche*, a bean casserole. Both dishes were enriched with smoked meats and sausages.

Holidays and special occasions such as wedding celebrations brought a community together around grilled and roasted meat and pies sweetened with honey, all served on ceramic dishes, accompanied by jugs of wine and mead (honey wine). An equally popular beverage, still in demand today in the Balkans, was *slivovitz* (plum brandy made with varieties of apricots, peaches and pears); it was considered the drink of strong men of the Balkans. In the fifteenth century, the Turkish invaders introduced pilaf, a food that blended the oriental products of rice and spices simmered alongside lamb or beef (Muslim laws prohibited the consumption of pork), often cut into pieces called kebabs. The meal was complimented by a drink called “the wine of the Muslims”—coffee and *lokum*. *Sarmale*/stuffed cabbage and *ciorba*, a thick stew-like soup (usually sour), and the Middle Eastern moussaka became increasingly popular dishes. Each nation claimed them as their own.

In all the Balkan cultures, when people attended social meals they came dressed in their best clothing, left weapons at the door, and offered prayers of thanks before and after a meal. There would be a rigorously observed seating order at the table, marking the importance of each person in attendance. Entertainment was as important as the food that was being served. Musicians, acrobats, dancing bears, and magicians would perform, and the guests themselves would sing and dance. As time progressed, the assortments of china, silverware, pots and pans, furniture, table cloths, and table manners also became more refined. Some things didn't change, however. It was expected that guests would get drunk, and often insults were exchanged, so vitriolic that they created family feuds that lasted for generations. All in all, food reflected, and continues to reflect the metis cultures of the Balkans, often described as *talmesh-balmesh*—a dish whose ingredients cannot be identified.

Clothing also defined nationality. One of the most unique traditional costumes was that of the Vlachs/Wallachians who inherited the ancient dress of the Dacians. Very little changed over the centuries, as can be seen in the chiseled figures on Trajan's Column in Rome, depicting events in the early 100s. Vlach and Wallachian men wore tight white pants made of felt; white shirts with long and large sleeves that were colorfully embroidered hung over the trousers which were held up by a wide leather belt with many pockets. Leather moccasins, a conic lamb fur hat with the top rolled down, a well-tailored waistcoat, and a sleeveless sheepskin coat carried on the shoulders as a cape, completed the shepherds' outfits. Women wore overlapping woolen skirts (in some regions only two aprons, front and back) covering an ankle-length white underskirt with an embroidered hem. The skirt was loomed with colorful motifs, and the blouse/chemise was equally embellished and artfully laced; so, too, was the white scarf that generously covered the head, neck, and shoulders. A necklace made of large beads or gold coins showed the wealth

and social status of the woman. A narrow belt woven with geometric designs, knitted woolen socks, moccasins that were similar to those worn by men, and a well tailored hip-sized sheepskin completed the wardrobe. Married women always wore scarves. Men proudly carried long clubs with the handle carved in the shape of the Dacian flying dragon.

The Vlachs steadfastly preserved their cultural heritage without trying to impose it on others. They were spread across different countries where their immensely profitable shepherding was highly respected by other ethnicities, and versions of their costumes (described above) were adopted by migratory people (who could not possibly have come from Eurasia wearing this same attire). The Vlachs and the Wallachians were herdsmen, and their lonely occupation stimulated them to create a myth about *mitul mioritic* (the universe of shepherds). Basically, it was a ballad about a young shepherd, betrayed by his fellow herdsmen who envied his excellent sheep. Facing death, he was at peace, feeling he was going to a better place and accepting his tragic destiny with dignity and wisdom that combined Dacian beliefs and the example of Jesus. Nothing could take away his love for his herd and dogs, whom he trusted would attend his burial which, since he was unmarried, would be like a wedding ceremony witnessed by the forested mountains, the sun, the moon, and the stars. The more than a thousand versions of this ballad demonstrate the extent of the Wallachian lands and the common philosophical folklore of the Vlachs.

As for the culture of Orthodoxy, what most clearly defined it was church architecture. Emperor Justinian I achieved many commendable things in his illustrious reign, but perhaps the greatest of them was the construction of the Hagia Sophia (Church of Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople. For one thousand years it remained the largest cathedral in the empire. With its magnificent dome and breathtaking, colorful mosaic works, it dazzled visitors then and continues to do so. Its immense and elaborate structure inspired the Byzantine style of church building that was imitated by the Albanians, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Romanians, Serbians, and others Orthodox groups.

Russia drew inspiration from Byzantine church architecture and then added its own ornate style. Before 1050 Vladimir of Novgorod built an astonishing stone cathedral that was thirty-eight meters high and had six domes, and named it St. Sophia. In 1037 in Kiev, Prince Yaroslav the Wise started building the monumental Sofiiskyi Sobor/Saint Sophia towers. The Kyievo-Pecherska Lavra/Kyivan Cave Monastery was built around the same time; this fortified Cathedral, which became a symbol of the new Russian architecture featuring the onion shaped monastic structure became a cradle for the spread of culture. Numerous manuscripts (among them litopysets/chronicles)¹⁴ were masterfully written in the libraries there by the diligent Kievan monks. And, in 1330, Ivan I hired an Italian architect and workers to complete the Assump-

tion Cathedral in Moscow. King Matthias of Hungary benevolently lent his master builders and artists to Czar Ivan III who also engaged in large scale personal and public constructions. Matthias was so popular, that after he visited Slovakian city of Levoca in 1474, an entire altar was dedicated to him inside St. James Gothic cathedral. In fact, the face of Saint John resembles the features of the king.

In contrast to the Orthodox world where the monks basically lived and died in the same monastery built by a rich patron, Benedictine monks canvassed Eastern Europe where in the eleventh century they built their own Brevnov Monastery in a Western architectural style near Prague. Prince Trpimir of Croatia also welcomed them, and, as a result of their spiritual work, more than forty monasteries dotted the Adriatic coast. These religious structures evidenced the striking difference between Byzantine and Catholic architecture, something which was also reflected in the arts and cultural life. The Catholic area of the Balkans used the Latin alphabet; in the twelfth century, Croatian Archbishop Grgur of Bar wrote *Ljetopis popa Dukljanina* and *The Croatian Chronicle*, a historiography of his nation. King Bela III of Hungary, immersed in Catholicism and western culture, ordered one of his Latin scribes (recorded as *Anonymus Bele Regis Notarius*) to write *Gesta Hungarorum: The Deeds of the Hungarians*. Written before 1200, it glorifies the Arpad dynasty and its invasion of Transylvania. Unlike the humble and anonymous artwork done by the Balkan monks, in Hungary kings like Charles Robert Anjou employed Italian masters to work for them and produce artistic pieces. Furthermore, because the Hungarians were in close contact with central Europe, they progressed in the field of arts, architecture, fashion, and many other areas, especially under King Matthias. His *Biblioteca Corviniana* contained up to five thousand volumes; it was the second largest library in Europe after the Vatican Library. He spent thirty-three thousand gold coins a year to acquire books. His palace contained vast splendors, and entertainment at his court was known to be sumptuous.

Music has always been a part of human life and culture as well. It has played a role in self expression generally, but has also been used in entertaining, military drills, and religion, courtship, dancing, and many other artistic and spiritual endeavors. In the Balkan cultures, folk tunes were often combined with lyrics to underline feelings of happiness, grief, love, and celebration. Each nation or ethnicity had a rich tradition of vocal and instrumental music that was orally transmitted; every generation seemed to polish musical pieces before passing them down to their children. Religious music became highly refined in the Catholic Church, and an array of musical instruments, among them the organ, attracted virtuoso composers and singers; in time these compositions evolved into laic music of great artistry and sophistication.

In contrast to this, in the Orthodox Church most of the music was provided by the chanting of the priest and his altar assistants (all male); it rarely included a choir or allowed of public participation. Ecclesiastical music was regulated by the Byzantine Church with various and unique types of staff notations and instructions, all of which were shared by subordinate churches throughout Eastern Europe. The same musical letter-notation had been in use in West since the 520s. The music of Orthodoxy was subject to such a high level of control that even hired funeral mourners had to follow a particular pattern. Most monks learned the church music phonetically; certainly none of the folk singers or instrumentalists knew how to read notes.

To what extent was cultural life experienced in the Dark Ages by ordinary people, like the serfs who lived in half-dug huts with no windows and lit by stoves? Certainly there was dancing and singing. Incidentally, Gypsy music did not arrive in the Balkans before the Turkish invasion.¹⁵ People were judged by the kind of clothes they wore, and the dictum “clothes define a person” was applicable there and has lasted. Civility was important in the Byzantine Empire, as indicated by the elaborate portrayal of clothing in the artwork of the time. One of the early and great influences on Byzantine fashion (733) was the daughter of the leader of the Khazars, who took the baptismal name of Irene when she married Emperor Constantine V. With her dowry she brought to Constantinople her beautiful national dress, *tzitzakion*. She proudly wore the garment, and it drew admiration and respect in both the royal circle and from ordinary subjects. Seeking to flatter the empress and win her approval, the court ladies copied it, and soon there was a style of court dress for women and ceremonial robes for men. Distinctive court clothing became fashionable for all important leaders and functionaries and spread throughout the entirety of the Byzantine Empire and Eastern Europe, a trend which lasted for hundreds of years. Ironically, it was perceived as Greek fashion; similarly, wearing barbarian trousers was more practical than the Roman toga, and later, influenced by the Turkish military uniform, the boyars adopted the turban, *shalvars* (balloon-like pants), a wide belt of silk, and colorful shoes with the tips curled upwards, to which were added many small bells.

Speaking and dressing like a Greek aristocrat was a hallmark of the Balkan nobility. The boyar was the local knight, but, unlike the western knight who had to excel in hunting, appreciate epic poems, and be able to decapitate a victim with a single blow of the sword, the indolent boyar paid someone else to do these things in his name. He was less interested in charming women with his wit and musical skill or dominating men with an iron fist; he preferred to patiently wait to take over a throne or inherit a manor from a deceased parent. Unlike his western counterpart, the Balkan knight scarcely touched any shin-

ing armor, with the exception of his long sword; he preferred to wear heavily ornate Byzantine robes sewn with gold and silver threads and headgear that reached preposterous shapes and sizes. Eventually, and ironically, the cross that was traditionally sewn onto his robes was adopted by the Slavic armies, and they began to look knightly.

The Middle Ages was the age of chivalry in the western world. Western knights traveled widely; when they reached their destination, they relaxed and partied accordingly to well-established etiquette, most likely in the castle of another knight. One of the most prized forms of entertainment was to display military skill to potential allies during friendly games of expertise and valor, all the while conquering the hearts of the ladies in the audience. In Eastern Europe, however, knightly activities took on a different cast. The Balkan knight was basically sedentary; his fighting skill was measured by how adept he was at elaborate games of intrigue; acts of backstabbing and deception were applauded. Arrogant and drunk with power, he made certain that every event was pre-arranged and every goal achieved with a minimum risk to himself. His main partner and protector was the church, and this gave him the right to dominate others. He was the tyrant of his manor, flogging and even killing his subjects arbitrarily. Needless to say, his chameleon-like behavior greatly influenced the moral values of his serfs.

Guilt was a cultural asset, and it was preached by the Church at Mass to people on their knees with their foreheads touching the cold stone floor; in turn people blamed each other for any problem, bickered and falsely accused one another, with an unquenchable thirst for vengeance, of a real or perceived slight. One sign of intelligence was to possess more by doing less and to steal without being caught. It was inconceivable to ask for something without offering a bribe and common to hate anyone who did better than oneself and to scheme to destroy him; biting the hand that fed one was considered the right way to avenge economic injustices. To be cruel was to show courage, and assassination was the best way to eliminate an enemy. Certainly, revenge was a sign of honor. Someone who had a chip on his shoulder was viewed as just excessively proud. At the same time, people perfected the role of the victim and learned how to cleverly ask for pity. Invoking God's mercy was the best way to avoid harm. Everyone bent over for someone, including the emperor, even though he bowed only to an icon. Everyone knew all too well that a bowed head made it possible to avoid the blow of the sword. Nevertheless, the king or emperor's scepter and crown represented the supreme power bestowed on him by God himself, a power that was not to be challenged.

Reasoning was an act of convenience. Correctness and discipline were broadly negotiable, since Balkan people changed their definitions according to what was beneficial to them. To dodge authority was the norm and to

betray was part and parcel of the process of survival; and the mob went with the master who promised the most, regardless of the lies involved. Broken trust and misplaced faith were so common that Balkanians accepted them as part of life and “God’s will, to challenge a true believer.” Because they were traditionally servile to any foreign power, the people rejected change: what they had achieved was, in their view, good enough. Their rulers surrounded themselves with foreign mercenaries and acted preemptively to weed out potential enemies by mercilessly killing them, including their own brothers, sons, and fathers. Somehow all these hallmarks of the Balkan character came to be overlooked when they were rolled together with blind love for the motherland. This created mythical heroes and inflated legends that found their places in the history books of each nation. No doubt, people wanted to look up to someone besides God. If there was no such ideal person to command respect, a legend was waiting to be set in stone for the individual who, in his or her lifetime, was willing to stand up for many challenges and die for them—an act that brought a much-needed sense of identity and stability in an otherwise unstable world.

To summarize, spirituality dealt with the meaning of human life. Since it led the individual to think beyond the limits of the material world, it involved the search for the ultimate divinity. Religion interpreted those beliefs, and Christianity used the teachings of Jesus to clarify them. The Orthodox Church did more than that, however, as it converted multitudes of barbarians, successfully molded them into orderly societies, and culturally tried to stimulate and develop them—albeit with unexpected results. This process of acculturation came at a heavy price. Even though the Greeks were initially culturally more advanced than the rest of Western Europe, barbarian invaders kept on intruding into Balkan societies, and by sowing the seeds of certain bad social habits, they soon dragged the Byzantines down to a level below that of the English, French, Germans, and Italians, who happened to be Catholics. While the Catholics were building universities, rapidly advancing toward the Renaissance, and evolving a superior culture, the highest spiritual and cultural aspiration of Orthodox believers was to visit their sacred Mount Athos, and maybe Jerusalem. The Orthodox Church was more concerned with ensuring the stability of its nations than it was with encouraging cultural and scientific progress. No change was a good thing; it was the way God wanted it; people should be thankful and happy with what they had because looking for something better would lead to sin. Oblivious to the passage of time and to new discoveries, Orthodoxy remained dogmatically rigid, and no religious anarchists or heretics dared to try to change it. Many religious changes took place in the West, yet nothing happened in the East. The result was that Eastern Europe stayed at a fourteenth century level of culture. Its

strict religion, endorsed tyrannical rulers who claimed to be “crowned by God,” made sure they enjoyed unchallenged control over their “boot licking nations.” After the fall of the Byzantine Empire, the Russians and Turks took pains to ensure that change did not happen, thereby further fertilizing the roots of a cultural bazaar that became the complex and troublesome historic process of Balkanization.

NOTES

1. Thomas S. Noonan and K. Kovalev Roman, “Prayer, Illumination, and Good Times,” in *The Expansion of Orthodox Europe: Byzantium, the Balkans and Russia*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 175.

2. It is likely that Serbian folklore concerning “Czar Trojan” refers to Emperor Trajan, whom the later migrant Serbians could not possibly have known; they borrowed the legends from the Vlachs of Moesia, who, like the southern Dacians, lived under Roman occupation during his reign.

3. John V.A. Fine, *The Late Medieval Balkans: A Critical Study from the Late Twelfth Century to the Ottoman Conquest* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 39.

4. Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions Among the Slavs: SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 49–50.

5. Peter Arnott, *The Byzantines and Their World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 246.

6. William of Tyre, *Historia Transmarina* 20.4; see also Roger of Howden, *Chronicle*, Madrid: MS Esc. Gr. 265 [Y.II.10]: 1180, fols. 368–372, as described in G. de Andrés, *Catálogo de los códices griegos de la Real Biblioteca de El Escorial* Vol. 2 (Madrid, 1965).

7. As noted, Latin was the official language of the Croatians, although the Cyrillic alphabet was used in the church until the nineteenth century; even today the Glagolitic liturgy is still performed in some churches in Croatia. Romanians used Old Church Slavonic in official documents until the end of the sixteenth century; for liturgical purposes, they used it still longer, even though it was understood only by a handful of elite.

8. The cultural and spiritual legacy of the two saintly brothers is reflected in modern institutions, such as Cyril and Methodius National Library of Sofia, St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo (Bulgaria), Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje (Macedonia), University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava (Slovakia), and Ss. Cyril and Methodius Cathedral in Prague (Czech Republic). Numerous churches and monasteries throughout Eastern Europe bear their names.

9. A map of Europe (approximately 10 x 6 feet), drawn in 1154 by an Arabian geographer hired by the Norman King Roger II, did not show most of the newly formed Balkan countries, but identified the locations of many cities of Garuasia (Croatia) which he had visited. More than one hundred years later, *The Travels of Marco Polo*

(*Il Milione*) described the adventurous trip of this tradesman of Dalmatian origin to the Far Orient between 1271 and 1298.

10. Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 967n3.

11. Large communities of Daco-Moesian Vlachs spoke a Latin dialect that is still spoken today by Aromanians in Albania, Istro-Romanians in Croatia, Kutsovlachs in Macedonia, and Tsintsars living in Bulgaria and Serbia, as well in areas of Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Ukraines.

12. Niketas Choniātēs, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniātēs*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 257.

13. Based on some tendentious linguistic arguments (as presented in Stephen Sisa's *The Spirit of Hungary*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Library and Collection, 1984, 186–187), it has been said that there is little in common between the lexicon of the Romanians and the Vlachs of the Balkans. The Romanian language consists of more than 75 percent Latin words, and the rest is heavily imbued with words of Slavic origin. But accordingly to the “findings,” the Vlachs adopted more than 50 percent of their language from the Greeks; only some 20 percent of it is rooted in the Romanian language. If that is the case, it surely demonstrates how little the Vlachs interacted with the Bulgarians or Serbs, even though they shared the same land. It should be noted that a different linguistic paradigm was in place a thousand years ago when Daco-Roman Vlachs from north and south of Danube spoke the same language. What is certain is that today a Romanian can read an Italian newspaper, as can a Macedo-Romanian, an Istro-Romanian (called Ciribiri; these people speak an old Vlaski language, which is still another Romanian dialect). And, despite opinions to the contrary, Romanian grammar is closer to Latin than Italian, even though the two nations are hundreds of miles apart. In addition to the twenty million people inside Romania who speak Romanian, another five million outside its borders also speak that language, or dialects of it. The contention that Romanian (even the Dacian) language comes from the Albanian is absurd since the latter is not related to any other language in the world. If there are some one hundred words shared by both languages, that is because the Vlachs introduced them in parts of Albania where they lived for centuries.

14. One of these was a document written by Nestor in 1113 that referred to the Vlachs, whom he called “Volochi,” and their efforts at fighting back the Hungarians.

15. In modern times, the Gypsy presence and their music is a common denominator in all Eastern European countries.

Chapter Eight

In the Name of God

Constantine the Great (combined reign 306–337) imposed the dogma of a favorite church in the Roman Empire and declared Sunday to be the official day of rest for Christians, unlike Saturday for the Jews. He used the Council of Nicea to protect Christianity against schisms and disputes over the authenticity of the gospels and manuscripts about the time and teachings of Jesus, including the gnostic texts and other controversial documents of the earlier church. Some of these texts were either destroyed or discarded. Christianity claimed to be a monotheistic religion, but God had a son and He was entrusted with a family of saints who possessed different kinds of protective powers, a spiritual pantheon that was not too different from that of Greek and Roman mythology. With the Creed of Nicea in 325, Christianity was set on a solid foundation as far as its beliefs, canons, and decrees were concerned. It fixed the church calendar and its celebrations and feast days, and thus united the Church under a single doctrine. At the close of the year 500, when the Roman Empire split into the East and West with capitals in Constantinople and Rome, Christianity also became divided into Orthodox and the Catholic churches. Orthodoxy was led by a Byzantine emperor who was taken to be God's entrusted representative on earth and whose throne was thought to be divinely protected; the Catholic Church was headed by a pope in Rome, considered to be the vicar of Christ. But there was an important difference between the governance of the two institutions: the emperor could name the bishops who were in full charge of their church, while the pope considered the bishops to be his lieutenants and granted them no autonomy. The two churches differed on many doctrinal and practical matters from the interpretation of faith and role of icons, to baptism, confession, holy matrimony and priestly ordination. Each was in charge of the spiritual life of many nations

and was the foundational institution of a large state. Most of all it offered divine blessings to Christian warriors.

When the barbarian invasions from Eurasia brought in millions of pagans who settled in the Carpatho-Danubian lands, the Catholic and Orthodox churches aggressively competed with each other over the vast numbers of potential converts. Baptisms would result in shifts in military and economic power—shifts that could be used to re-enforce the strength of the two political and religious sub-empires with respect to their rival churches and civilizations. Consequently, both the papacy and patriarchy began a race to convert the barbarians, crown their kings, and vest their bishops, so as to attract them into either the Western or Eastern camps. This race reached its peak during the ninth century after most of the barbarian invaders had moved south and settled in the Balkan Peninsula. There they continued to carry out their predatory incursions inside the Byzantine Empire.

While the migratory exodus was from east to west, the religious movement extended in the opposite direction. In the eastern lands, there was chaos at all levels, while in the west people lived in more or less orderly societies. It was at this time that Charlemagne became Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Its borders constituted a clear line of demarcation between Eastern and Western Europe. Catholicism had an active interest in expanding eastwards and so helped Prince Mojmir to create Greater Moravia in 833. There fourteen warlords were baptized and pledged their unconditional allegiance to the new religion, one that covered the areas of what are today Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and regions of Hungary and Poland. The huge Slavic military power was thereby defused and unable to unleash its force against the Catholic world. This new state provided Central Europe with a military buffer against the barbarian peril of the Avars and Bulgars, who, together with the eastern Slavs, raided deep into the Balkan Peninsula and repeatedly laid siege to Adrianople, Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and other wealthy Byzantine wealthy cities.

Eventually, Emperor Michael III established an Orthodox presence in the eastern lands through the missionaries he sent to the barbarians. He was thereby able to repel any lingering German influence. His most important religious conquest, however, was the Bulgars, who were courted by both the Germans and the Latin powers. When Boris became czar of the Bulgars in 852, he masterfully played the religious card against the Byzantines, the Germans, and the Moravians; the latter wanted the militarily strong Bulgars on their side. He did not have a preference for either Catholicism or Orthodoxy, but was keen to choose the one that would give him more land and greater religious independence. A surprisingly powerful attack by the Croats and an intensified threat from the Byzantines in 855 prompted him to

choose Orthodoxy. But he wanted his own church and so approached Pope Nicholas I. His actions initiated a crisis that led to the schism between the Eastern and Western churches. Since it was aware that Bulgarian Catholicism might advance into the main Byzantine lands, Constantinople agreed to the autocephalous status of the Church of Bulgaria in 870. If Boris had joined the Franks instead of the Byzantines, Catholicism would have spread throughout the Balkans and most likely different languages would be spoken in the peninsula today. For the time being, the Bulgars represented a defense between the East and the West.

Khan Simeon also challenged Constantinople when, in 926, he received a crown and a scepter from Pope John X that made him the official emperor of the Bulgars. He was the head of the church and recognized papal primacy, but he was also determined to prove his independence from Rome. He made his point by invading Thracia and defeating the Byzantines four times. Later, his son Peter I re-established ties with Constantinople by marrying the daughter of Romanus I, who recognized both his royal title and the Bulgarian Patriarchate. With this shift, the pope and his Catholicism were no longer needed in Bulgaria. However, Croatia accepted Frankish suzerainty and therefore aligned itself with Istria and Venetia. It is noteworthy that in this period arbitrary claims of Catholicism and Orthodoxy were made over lands and nations, but their missionaries (usually attached to diplomatic missions) had to do the real conversion and plant the definitive flag of either Constantinople or Rome. In short, the main dilemma that a barbarian ruler faced was to choose between obeying an emperor from Constantinople or a pope from Rome.

To the dismay of the Orthodox Church, which was dominated by Greeks, two monk brothers, Constantine and Methodius from Thessaloniki, engaged in a mission to provide the Slavic speaking peoples with an alphabet that would give them a written language. This led to the elimination of liturgical Greek in the Slavic churches—a major blow for the prelates of Constantinople. The brothers continued their missionary work north of the Danube, where in 861 they failed to compete against Judaism and Islam in converting the Khazars to Orthodoxy. Two years later Constantine and Methodius went to Moravia where they converted many influential pagans, including the grandfather of Duke Wenceslaus I, who in turn succeeded in Christianizing the Czechs. Eventually the monk brothers arrived in Rome where they sought papal recognition for their intent to provide liturgy in Slavonic. In 868 Pope Hadrian II ordained them and their disciples for their service to the Slavic people, knowing full well that this would lead more Slavs to Catholicism. Constantine changed his name to Cyril and died shortly thereafter, while Methodius returned to Moravia where he was put

in prison for three years by the Germans. He was freed by Pope John VIII and continued his mission to spread the Cyrillic alphabet among the Slavs, including translating religious manuscripts from Greek to Old Church Slavonic. Rome promoted Methodius to the rank of archbishop and he died in Moravia in 885. He and his brother would be remembered for building the first bridge of understanding between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Thus, ironically, the two brothers from a distinguished Greek family became Apostles to the Slavs whom they drew away from the West by developing a new alphabet. Their disciples took refuge in the Bulgaria of King Boris who put their knowledge to good use.

A serious problem arose from the inside the Orthodox Church when in 726 Leo III prohibited the veneration of icons (even a crucifix). Pope Gregory II was appalled and condemned the sacrilegious emperor who meanwhile decided to attack Italy and unite the two religions under his dominion. Unfortunately, his fleet was destroyed by a storm, a natural disaster that was perceived as an ill omen. In 732 a Muslim army of seventy thousand advanced toward the heart of Europe and occupied Bordeaux where they butchered its residents and burned their churches. The invaders continued on their path of destruction through the Frankish lands until they faced Charles who led Frankish troops between Tours and Poitiers. After a week of skirmishes, the Turks were defeated on the first day of Ramadan—another ill omen. Not properly dressed for the cold weather, they simply left the battlefield and never returned to their camp or attempted a similar campaign. For his important victory, Charles, the Frankish leader, took the name Martel (the “Hammer”); he is considered by many to be the knight who saved Christianity. One of his successors was Charlemagne (r. 768–814), his grandson, who was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Rome for his efforts to achieve Pax Romana in Europe. Like the other Charles, he extended his territory with a cross in one hand and a sword in the other, as he advanced into Slovenia and along the Dalmatian coast.

Empress Irene (r. 797–802) foresaw a Catholic intrusion into her Byzantine Empire, especially after Croatia sought protection from Charlemagne. She restored image worship and prevented a war initiated by the Byzantines against West, when most of the Slav territories that had been incorporated into the Carolingian Empire were returned to Constantinople. These territories remained Catholic, but Orthodoxy was stronger than ever in the Byzantine Empire. However, over the span of almost two hundred years, its icons were destroyed and removed from the churches, even from inside the Hagia Sophia. Ironically, this religious reform came from the then-enemy religion, Islam, which, like Judaism, did not condone the worship of any holy images.

Like the Bulgars, the Serbs were initially inclined to choose between the Catholic and Orthodox Church. When in 1077 Duke Mihajlo Vojislav established the Kingdom of Zeta (Montenegro) and received a crown from the pope, he became a vassal of Rome. Now that he was a king, he declared that his land was no longer part of the Byzantine Empire. The Serbs were set to become Catholics when Prince Miroslav (who was responsible for the *Miroslav Gospels*) was excommunicated in 1181 by the pope because he had murdered a bishop. The prince joined his brother, Stefan Nemanja, who had been baptized Catholic but remained in the Orthodox camp due to his friendship with Emperor Manuel I. This did not stop him, however, from entering into an alliance with the Venetian Republic, which encouraged the Slavs on the Adriatic coast to attack the Byzantine Empire. Nemanja had a change of heart when he realized that by accepting Catholic domination he would lose exactly what he wanted in the first place—his independence. So began a campaign to eliminate every trace of Latinity from his realm, including any Catholic influence on his Serbs.

The ambitious Nemanja aimed to replace the Byzantine Empire with his own; he once again looked to Rome, asking the pope to put together a coalition of western kings to help him build an Orthodox Greco-Serbian Empire in the Balkans. This grand idea was perceived by his Orthodoxy leaders as an act of submission to the Catholic Church, and his son succeeded him in 1217, having been given the title of king by Pope Honorius III. Two years later, however, Stefan II also received a crown sent by the patriarch of Nicea, and so became the first true king of Serbia (r. 1196–1228). His trust in Orthodoxy was thereby fully restored. This served as final confirmation of the fact that the Balkans would never be incorporated into Catholicism. However, this did not stop the Bulgars and Serbs from acting on their bellicose intentions to occupy and plunder Constantinople, renowned for its wealth and glamorous life.

Meanwhile, to the northeast, above the Sea of the Azov, neither Catholicism nor Orthodoxy could prevent the powerful Khazars, who controlled the vast steppes of today's Ukraine, from converting to Judaism as early as the eighth century. Most likely this was done despite the Byzantine Empire's encroachment from one side and an Islamic incursion from the other. Theirs was a spiritual decision intended to preserve the Khazars' ethnic neutrality and independence. When the Pechenegs invaded their empire, many Khazars, who were related to the Magyars, were forced to migrate to the Pannonian fields, and still more of them followed after the Kievans confiscated their lands. Suddenly, Judaism was present in the middle of Europe. Nevertheless, the majority of Hungarians converted to Catholicism in 1000 under King Stephen/Istvan, who had received his crown from Rome.¹ The Hungarian kings

tried hard to satisfy the Catholic Church, except for King Ladislaus/Laszlo IV (r. 1272–1290), who

led a merry life with his Cuman companions and left the cares of the government to others. During this period the royal court was more pagan than Christian. Thus the Catholic Church in Bosnia was left without its natural defender. It was with the purpose of stimulating the king to a resumption of a pro-Catholic policy that the pope sent a legate to Ladislav's court (1279); the king promised to exterminate the heresy and actually gave orders for a renewal of persecution. But as a matter of fact, nothing was done.²

Ladislaus, whose Cumanian roots were in Transylvania, preferred to align himself with the East; the pope reacted by ordering a crusade against the heretical king, forcing him to pretend he was loyal to the West.

The Hungarian crown passed from King Wenceslaus III (Ladislaus V) in Buda to his father, the king of Bohemia in Prague, then to Otto Duke of Lower Bavaria (who abdicated the throne), and finally in 1301 to Charles Robert of Anjou, who at age thirteen came from Naples to rule the Hungarians. This shows how close the Catholic connection was between Hungary and the western nations. After the end of the Arpad dynasty, Hungarians were essentially ruled by foreign kings and monarchs who never admitted to being part of the Balkans or Eastern Europe. Yet, the nation was treated by the West like a poor relative with an embarrassing past. This fact became evident when the Golden Horde invaded Hungary; King Bela IV ran for his life and asked in vain for help from his powerful Catholic neighbors. They had promised to protect his people, but never actually did so. In spite of their multiple and deadly raids on the West, including the destruction of the Moravian empire, the Hungarians were forcibly integrated into the culture and spirituality of the West. They continued to expand outward toward the Balkans as they swallowed up the Croatia, Dalmatia and Slavonia. Also, they considered themselves westernized and not part of the Byzantine Empire, nor the family of Balkan nations. The reality was a little different, however, since the Hungarians did not fit into the Holy Roman Empire as a German or Latin nation.

On the other hand, a quick look back to the 1160s reveals how thoroughly Emperor Manuel I tried to interfere in Hungarian matters of state when he supported Stephen IV and married him to his niece Maria. The contender to the throne, Stephen III, remained a devoted Catholic and asked for help from Frederick I, who sent German troops. They dethroned Stephen IV, who ran back to Manuel for shelter. He promised to pledge himself to Orthodoxy if he received help in recapturing the Hungarian throne, but Manuel instead preferred to make peace with Stephen III, and Stephen

IV fled back to Frederick. The latter also declined help to the unlucky ex-king, who was then poisoned. However, Manuel proved more successful in grooming the future King Bela III (the brother of Stephen III). He was educated in Constantinople, changed his name to Alexius, and later became brother-in-law of another emperor. In 1166 they co-presided over the synod of the Byzantine Church, all of which were viewed as unpardonable deeds by the Hungarians. Consequently Bela could not occupy the throne of his deceased brother and was forced to submit himself to Catholic patronage (Pope Alexander III). He was crowned in 1173. Shrewd King Bela played it safe with Orthodox power, and in 1185 he married his daughter to Emperor Isaac II. During the twenty-year long religious royal event, there was a spectacular revival of Orthodoxy, and Manuel almost forced the pope to crown him the sole emperor of East and West. For obvious religious and political reasons this did not happen, and subsequently no reconciliation was possible between the two major churches of Europe.

The Catholic Church relentlessly disputed the rites and administration of Orthodoxy. The turning point came on Saturday, July 16, 1054, when papal representatives disrupted the liturgy in the Hagia Sophia and placed a bull of excommunication on its altar. This marked the beginning of the Great Schism. It was based on the refusal on the part of Orthodoxy to accept the doctrine of *filioque* (in Latin, “and from the Son”) that proclaimed Jesus to be equal with God, his father. Many rituals were contested as well, i.e., Orthodox believers held the thumb, index, and middle finger together to represent the Trinity when they crossed their hearts, while Catholics used an open palm; each had its own way of performing communion and baptisms; and so on. And, the irrevocable split between the two Christian churches had colossal effects on each of them. Their differences caused the Byzantine to fear western invaders and their Catholicism; Anna Comnena named them *Kelts*, including the Franks, Latins, and crusaders, “brazen-faced, violent men, money-grabbers and where their personal desires are concerned quite immoderate.”³ When their counts came to see Emperor Alexius I, they proved to know little about royal etiquette, showed lack of respect for him, talked endlessly, and behaved rudely.

Things were different in Bohemia, where with the blessing of the Catholic Church Charles IV (r. 1346–1378) built the new city of Prague with its turreted stone bridge and statues over the Vltava, as well as the University of Prague, Cathedral of St. Vitus, and the fortified Castle of Karlstejan. These made it an imperial city and the cultural center of Central and Eastern Europe. King Charles raised the Bohemian state to an unsurpassed level of power and led its people into an unprecedented golden age, for which he was named *Pater Patriae*/Father of the Country.

Like the Czechs, Croats, and Hungarians, the Poles adopted Catholic rites not because of their religious beliefs, but in order to enter into convenient alliances with the western nations. Mieszko I, a Slavic King, understood the liturgy of Cyril and Methodius but accepted Catholicism in order to protect his nation and keep it prosperous. Becoming a Catholic almost guaranteed better security and a richer life; by contrast, in the ever-troubled land of Orthodoxy, terror could strike at any time in any place, and there was no way to prevent or control it. When King Casimir III the Great died in 1370 and his throne was occupied by his nephew, Hungarian Louis of Anjou, the religious fate of the Poles was sealed. They would forever be associated with European Catholicism. Louis's legacy included the founding of the University of Krakow, a legal system that spelled out his subjects' obligations to the church and established advantageous diplomatic ties between East and West.

In spite of their repeated attacks on Constantinople, the Russians were the only Slavs who never entertained the idea of switching from Orthodoxy to Catholicism. Nevertheless, after the city fell, the capital of Orthodoxy was transferred to Kiev, and Moscow was its new bastion. Czar Ivan III (r. 1462–1505) used it to take over the entirety of the Russian lands, and due to his influential wife, Sophia Paleologue, created a Byzantine-like court in order to enforce his tyrannical rule. Pope Paul II's hopes of including Russia in the Holy See quickly evaporated when Ivan eliminated his brothers and behaved like an emperor, one who certainly did not want to share his power with any pope. To make his commitments perfectly clear, he adopted the double-headed eagle emblem of the Byzantine Empire. He basically used the Orthodox Church to enslave the Russians and prevent them from getting beyond the Dark Ages.⁴ The Russians bitterly and successfully fought the Teutonic knights and later the Swedes, and thus eliminated any Catholic interference in their lands. On the other hand, they had a way of re-inventing things so as to make them fit with what they wanted to believe, and so created their own version of Orthodoxy; Kiev was proclaimed the New Jerusalem, and Moscow, the Third Rome. The Russians affectionately called the city "Holy Mother Moscow."

Eastern and Western European knights met very rarely and only because certain alliances brought them together. This happened during the crusades against the Ottoman armies when they shared a series of battles that followed for a few centuries. Many eastern rulers tried to make the best of both worlds, among them Vlad II. In 1431 he participated in the Nuremberg tournament where the Wallachian prince was declared the winner; the prize was an imperial ring presented by Emperor Sigismund, a Toledo sword from the knights, and a gold buckle from an admiring lady in the audience. Most importantly, the victory brought him induction into the Order of the Dragon, certified by

a gold collar with a dragon insignia engraved on it. As a member of the elite *Drachenorder*, whose membership consisted of only a few European nobles, he came to be named Dracul by his countrymen; they also named his son Dracula. Dracul converted to Catholicism in Nuremberg, his son was baptized Catholic, and both invited Franciscan missionaries to come to their land since they wanted to bring Catholicism to Wallachia. Dracul and Dracula were dedicated to the fight against the Ottomans and wished to have the pope on their side, but they could not overcome the now well-established Orthodoxy. A struggle followed, and both met violent deaths at the hands of their own people. A note of interest: historic images of Mircea the Elder, his son Vlad II, and his grandson Vlad the Impaler all show them in knightly regalia, not in heavy Byzantine robes, a fact that demonstrates their western orientation.

In 1211, on the western side of the Carpathians, the Teutonic Order came to Transylvania. There they founded the city of Brasov and a cluster of fortresses; a year later, they established Bran Castle (known as Dracula's Castle). While they were there, they protected Hungary against the invading Cumans. The Hungarians, however, resented the fact that this powerful order pledged their loyalty to the pope instead of the Hungarian king. Because they were concerned that the Teutons would take over the rich Daco-Roman lands, the Hungarians expelled them in 1225. If they had stayed longer, they probably would have built the city of Malborg and the largest brick castle in the world, Marienburg (Castle of Mary), in Transylvania instead of in Poland. The Magyar, Saxon, and Szekely colonists brought a different culture to Wallachia even though they introduced the architecture of the Catholic Church and changed the Transylvanian landscape. In the meantime the Romanians of Transylvania had no political representatives in their own land, and their church was not included in the ruling of it. Elsewhere throughout most of Eastern Europe, the Orthodox Church remained unchallenged until Islam entered the Balkans and duplicated the bitter experience of the occupation of the Biblical land of Palestinian by the Turks.

The problem of bad blood in Jerusalem, also called the City of Peace, began in 614 when the Persians conquered it. They were aided by some twenty-six thousand Jewish residents to whom the city was handed over by the occupiers. According to a monk named Theophanes (who chronicled this event two hundred years later), ninety thousand Christians perished; the Holy Sepulcher was set afire; Christian shrines were desecrated; and the True Cross, the Holy Lance that pierced Jesus on the cross, the sponge that wiped his blood, and other relics were stolen. But the Byzantines later conquered the city (in 629) and took the anticipated revenge on its Jewish and Arab inhabitants. Moreover, Jews were prohibited by Emperor Heraclius, and centuries earlier by

Emperor Hadrian (r. 117–138), from entering the city. Heraclius restored the True Cross to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; he was subsequently glorified as God's champion and the first holy crusader. The Muslims occupied the city in 638; they returned blood for blood and laid claim to the city from whence Mohammed had journeyed to heaven. By this time, all three Abrahamic religions were represented in the city. A series of spectacular conquests in 1071 by the Seljuk Turks led by Sultan Alp Arslan gave them control of Palestine and the most sacred shrine of Christianity, the city of Jerusalem. They closed all the Christian sites, stopped pilgrims from visiting their holy shrines, and robbed or murdered anyone who subsequently attempted the journey.

What happened in Palestine with the Christian holy sites was an unimaginable humiliation for Europeans. From their perspective, Jerusalem had fallen on evil times. In November 1095, Pope Urban II addressed a huge crowd in Clermont, France, with the message, "Christ Himself will be your leader," as he held a large cross above the delirious audience. He assembled the First Crusade of Western knights to liberate the Holy Land of Palestine. To motivate them, the pope decreed that anyone who went and fought in the Holy Land would have their sins forgiven. The first crusaders (the name derives from the Portuguese *cruzado*/cross), or "God's soldiers of the Cross," proved their faith when in 1097 they crushed the Turks and conquered Nicea. The following year they occupied Antioch. They were, however, exhausted, militarily fragmented, and ready to quit their mission when they were revived by a miracle. Legend has it that the apostle Andrew appeared in a dream to a soldier who was otherwise a drunken and immoral individual. As a result of his vision, he pressed Count Raymond to excavate the area under the patio of St. Peter's Church, saying that there he would find the holy lance that had pierced Jesus on the cross. Indeed, after much digging a rusty spear was found. Convinced that faith and fate were on their side, the exhausted and dispirited troops rose, ready to battle and defeat the Turks—which happened shortly thereafter. In 1099 the crusaders re-took Jerusalem.

The city's frightened Muslims rushed to find shelter in the former Temple of Solomon. This was viewed by the crusaders as the ultimate insult. Because they were vengeful in victory and believed it was time to teach the pagans a religious lesson, the knights indulged in indiscriminate butchery of the Muslims as they sought refuge in the Dome of the Rock Mosque. Ten thousand Muslims were massacred; the heaps of corpses and streams of blood resulting from the atrocities were intended to please the Christian God. Many Jewish men (who, like Muslims, were circumcised) were killed as well. Contrary to their hope of having Palestine returned to them or at least being allowed to pray in their sanctuaries, the Jews were treated as Christ-killers. All the while, the Christians celebrated their freedom and vaunted their position of domi-

nance. The knights pretended to discover the relics of the True Cross which they carried into the next victorious Battle of Ascalon. They then founded the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099–1291). A Latin patriarch replaced the Greek one, thus making it perfectly clear that Catholicism, and not Orthodoxy, was in charge of religious matters in the Holy Land.

The news of the victory reached Europe and unleashed a wave of such jubilation that Pope Urban died of what seemed to be extreme happiness. This religious enthusiasm led to a parallel military campaign in which some seventy thousand westerners, lured by the riches of Palestine, put themselves under the command of Peter the Hermit and Walter the Penniless in the so-called Pauper's Crusade. This poor and unruly mob crossed Hungary and Bulgaria, leaving in its wake a wide path of destruction, rape, and pillage, and headed to Constantinople where they killed Greeks, mistaking them for Turks. Emperor Alexius I conveniently ferried them across to Anatolia. There the Seljuk Turks competed in massacring the ragged "crusaders" whose misplaced faith had motivated these incidents. At this historic juncture, events had taken a pathetic turn for the Christians, and a Second Crusade (1147–1149) was carried out by a combination of French and German warriors. They were defeated by the Seljuk Turks, and the group's survivors ended up in Jerusalem from whence they unsuccessfully attacked Damascus. Their defeat allowed the Muslims to attack and re-take the city in 1187. The Third Crusade began in 1189. It aimed to expel the Turks from Jerusalem and the Holy Land, but its leader, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, ingloriously drowned in Anatolia. The campaign concluded with a compromise: the knights allowed the Muslims to occupy Jerusalem in exchange for free passage for pilgrims who wished to visit Christian shrines. The only winner of this crusade was the Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja. He tried to manipulate Barbarossa into a coalition against the Byzantines; taking advantage of the fact that the crusaders were advancing toward Constantinople, he occupied lands from Niss to Kosovo and Skopje.

The Fourth Crusade, which lasted only two years, produced an unexpected twist: the Bible was dropped from one hand so that both hands could grab the hilt of the sword, not to kill Muslims, but to massacre their fellow Christians. It all began with repeated shaky regimes in Constantinople. Imperial power was collapsing there as the city struggled to fulfill its commitments to pay the European knights. When Alexius V, whom they had supported as the final candidate for the throne, also failed to pay them off, the knights decided to conquer not Jerusalem, but the Byzantine capital. They stormed Constantinople in 1204. In their fury, they demonstrated unlimited cruelty in killing and torturing their fellow Christians, regardless of age and sex, behavior that well surpassed any barbarian savagery. They plundered the Hagia Sophia,

where they placed a prostitute on the throne of the patriarch, and sacked the rest of the city's churches and palaces as well. In spite of all this, the western chronicler of these acts, Villehardouin, had only words of praise for the crusaders' achievement:

They all rejoiced and gave thanks to our Lord for the honor and the victory he had granted them, so that those who had been poor now lived in wealth and luxury. Thus they celebrated Palm Sunday [the Sunday before Easter] and the Easter Day following with hearts full of joy for the benefits our Lord and Savior had bestowed on them.⁵

A massive amount of war booty was carried back to the west, mainly to Venice. This sealed the Great Schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. It was also clear proof to the Turks that Constantinople's years were numbered. Meanwhile an *Imperium Romaniae*/Empire of Romania and many Latin kingdoms replaced parts of the Byzantine Empire. These lands were then ruled according to western law introduced with Catholicism. This did not succeed, however, for the Balkan people had an entirely different mindset than westerners when it came to matters of governance.⁶ The Albanians were temporarily occupied by the Venetians, while the Vlachs, who, under their King Ioannitsa fought against the Latin occupiers and defeated them, captured and executed Emperor Baldwin. In spite of this, in 1205 a papal emissary crowned Ioannitsa king; he and his Vlachs never compromised their religion after that. Nor did the Greeks who in 1261 recaptured Constantinople. It was at this point that most of the Latins, with their Catholicism, left the Byzantine lands.

The Children's Crusade of 1212 was not driven by the force of weapons and chivalrous knights, but by religious fantasy. Some fifty thousand children, who were believed to be pure souls, headed toward the Holy Land. Most ended up in the hands of pirates and were sold into slavery; some returned home sick and in rags; and the rest died in unknown locations. The fifth and sixth crusades achieved very little, except for the fact that Frederick II crowned himself "King of Jerusalem" in February 1229. When he departed from the city, he left so much quarreling and confusion among residents that the Turks occupied it in 1244. The arrival of the Mongols in the Holy Land sealed the fate of the next three crusades, as the knights tried in vain to use them against the Turks. After two hundred years of pursuing the noble dream of keeping the Holy Land and Jerusalem Christian, the crusaders found little reward from their God; in contrast, the Ottomans seemed to have been fully supported by theirs.

Certainly, the gods of the Mongols favored them to build an empire under the invincible sword of Genghis Khan who ruled one fifth of the planet's

land areas, from the Sea of Japan to the Caspian Sea. After his death in 1227, his son Ogadai continued the conquest legacy, and his grandson Batu led the Golden Horde to extend the empire into Eastern Europe. When in 1236 he destroyed Volga Bulgaria, numerous Russian principalities became his vassals, and his divided horde invaded Poland, the Danubian lands, and Central Europe. They subdued Moldavia, Transylvania, and the Second Bulgarian Empire, almost wiped Hungary off the map and totally devastated Moravia. The Christian god spared the rest of Europe when in 1242 Batu Khan had to return to Mongolia with his troops because of his uncle's death and new elections for the throne.

There were a number of reasons why the European crusades failed in spite of the religious motivation and military zeal of their soldiers. The vast distance the knights had to travel meant that the scorching climate in Palestine overheated their body armor. The sandy soil of the area made for insufficient pasture and water for their horses. And, because they consistently followed the same Roman roads, their stops could be predicted and they could be easily ambushed. But what affected the outcome more than anything else were the issues that arose amongst the knights themselves. And old and a new group of crusaders fought endlessly amongst themselves, killing each other over acquired lands which then often ended up in their wives' hands. With eleven Christian kings ruling the Holy Land in one century, many rival parties also killed each other for control of that area, thus reducing the military strength of the crusaders considerably. Simply put, they were in no position to continue fighting the monolithic Turkish army that prayed five times a day to Allah and was single-mindedly committed to *jihād*. Still, the crusaders succeeded in building some fifty castles, several literally on the sand, and left a lasting legacy of their faith in the land in which Jesus walked and preached.

As a historical parenthesis, the Knights Templar was a new order born out of the necessity to protect the pilgrims who traveled back and forth from Europe to Jerusalem. Initially, the poor and charitable monks who took on this task were totally dedicated to their cause and established their headquarters in the Temple of Solomon (hence their name). Soon they became warriors and then knights of a secret society, for they found many relics left by Jesus and his disciples. Their white mantles with a large red cross on the front distinguished them as elite fighters who ended up controlling the trade between Europe and the Middle East. Merchants competed to bring goods to both worlds and became richer with each transport that was taxed by the Templars. This produced so much money for the knights that they became successful bankers and builders in the Holy Land and Europe. Over two centuries, they attained such a power as to be able to threaten the both suzerainty of the

Catholic Church and the kings of Western Europe. This eventually proved to be their downfall, however. The Church wanted to possess the sacred objects and secret documents connected with life of Jesus that the Templars had accumulated, and the ever-bankrupt kings wanted their wealth. Specifically, Pope Clement V wanted their secret possessions, and in 1307 King Philip IV of France, who was hopelessly in debt to the Templars, ordered their arrest and confiscated their possessions. The Knights of Christ were then judged by the Inquisition to be “knights of anti-Christ.” In 1312, after they had been tortured and butchered, some of them burned at the stake, the famous order that had once numbered twenty thousand rigorously screened members was officially dissolved.

As for the Medieval Inquisition set up by Pope Gregory IX in 1233, it was an institution of the Catholic Church whose police force hunted down heretics. Under torture, they were forced to admit to any charges and condemned themselves to public execution. Those targeted included many Jews who had converted to Christianity for economic and political reasons, but persisted in practicing their ancient religion in secrecy. In Spain, they were named New Christians, but more often called *converses*/converts and *marranos*/pigs; there they were subject to the punishment of the Inquisition and expelled in 1478 and 1492. The fugitives and the expelled Jews found refuge in the Byzantine Empire (more than 20,000 arrived in Thessaloniki alone), where they once again had the option of becoming Christians in exchange for tax relief and other advantages. Not many took up the offer, choosing instead to enjoy the freedom that existed there and nowhere else. At the end of the ninth century, the Jews became so financially powerful in Thessaloniki that Methodius spoke against them in virulent language. They had extended their trade all over Eastern Europe and formed their own communities where they lived without the harassment they routinely experienced in the West. An exception to this was the Jews of Prague, who lived in a walled ghetto and were identified by yellow patches on their clothing, as they were in Rome.

The situation was different in the Balkans; in fact, Czar Alexander (r. 1331–1371) of Bulgaria divorced his Christian wife Theodora and married a Jewess. She was then baptized with the same name. The event elevated the Jews to unexpected heights, and in Byzantine lands they were named *servi camerae regis*/servants of the royal court, a title of privilege. The Polish city of Krakow (which became the capital) was the credit of their enterprise, and nearby Kazimierz had had its own Jewish town hall, synagogue, cemetery, and marketplace since the fourteenth century. Yet, they never assimilated. Moreover,

The hermetic solitude of the Jewish communities, coupled with the intellectual superiority of the Jews, who digested huge volumes of abstract commentaries on Scripture, aroused fantasies in the minds of Christians confronted by these autonomous, anonymous, but fiercely unified groups, these roving traders who made homes in one place but seemed to have roots elsewhere—in Spain, Egypt, Italy, and the like.⁷

They had no intention of trying to pass as Christian gentiles, whom they named *goyms* (those who are ignorant of Judaism and who eat pigs). Jews benefited most from the Ottoman conquests. They were welcomed by the sultans who made the best of what they could offer the young empire in the fields of commerce, finance, and the administration. Since that East or West, Catholic or Orthodox, meant little to them, they attended to their business in a profitable manner, and their patrons also benefited.

In the meantime, the former giant Byzantine Empire was gradually being sapped by destructive forces, both internal and external; only its religious power kept the moribund state alive. It could not match the power of the Ottomans, however, who occupied most of Anatolia and looked across the Bosphorus in search of the ideal beach upon which they might land their troops and attack Constantinople. As it turned out, there was no need for that; they were brought to the Balkans by the Byzantine civil war of 1341–1347 when supporters of adversaries John V and John VI battled each other and so sought Turkish help. The Turks arrived and put an end to the political butchery, but they overstayed their welcome and occupied the Gallipoli Peninsula. By now, it had become their bridgehead into Eastern Europe. Some speculate that Greece and the Balkans would now be different if the Venetians had continued to occupy Thessaloniki after its capture in 1387 at the hands of the Turks. They soon proved unstoppable in their efforts to occupy Macedonia, Bulgaria and the entire Balkan Peninsula.⁸

At this point, both the Byzantine and the western leaders realized that the Turks had to be stopped at any cost. Within two years, armies of longstanding enmity met on the killing fields of Kosovo where a battle raged on all fronts. This test of wills was remarkable for the sheer cruelty that was perpetrated in the name of the participants' respective deities. The defeat of the Christian coalition put an end to Serbian power; Ottoman flags marked the Danubian line with the Balkans. The future of Eastern Europe and, for that matter, of the entirety of Christendom, was now at stake—a predicament that triggered a series of so-called Balkan crusades. The most important of them was aimed at Nicopolis where in 1396 the united armies of Eastern and Western Europe

attempted to stop the Turks from advancing any farther north of the Danube River. Both sides geared up for a major battle, but the Christian coalition had a bad start; Hungarian King Sigismund, who was entrusted with the campaign, had lost control over the conflict a long time before the first clash of arms. According to a contemporary commentary:

Without delving into the various controversial aspects of Sigismund's character, we may conclude two main points contributed immensely to the failure of the Crusade: his weakness and his immorality. He failed to persuade the leaders of the foreign auxiliaries to believe in the wisdom of his defensive plans both at Buda and at Nicopolis, and he was, from the beginning of the campaign, more of a follower than a leader. His royal license helped to demoralize an already demoralized army. Women of infamous character were gathered on the way to Nicopolis wherever the Holy Warriors halted; and the siege became remarkable for immorality and gambling rather than for organized military enterprise.⁹

In spite of this, the heavily armored French knights valiantly engaged in a pitched battle heading uphill under the scorching sun against well-prepared Janissaries who stood their ground. When their horses were killed, the knights fought on foot, ramming the sultan's formidable elite guard. The latter was ready with a counter attack that proved murderous for the exhausted assailants. In no time at all, an entire army of the best knights of Europe was cut down by the yatagan sword almost to the last man. The captives were executed in the name of Allah under the crescent flags. Sadly, the arrogance and lack of discipline of the various Christian factions—troops who were fighting for ultimately selfish purposes—resulted in an error that was to be repeated over and over in numerous crushing defeats, with major historical consequences.

While the rest of Christianity kept losing ground, Manuel II (r. 1391–1425), whose Byzantine Empire consisted of a mere three patches of land around Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and the tip of Peloponnesus, remained neutral. He found himself in the humiliating position of having to pay tribute to the Ottomans and aid them in their destructive raids against the Greek cities, many of which would eventually be erased from the map. He clearly saw where the Christian defeats would lead, mainly to the fall of the Byzantine Empire, and secretly tried hard to unite East with West in a common fight. "Our last resource [against the Turks]," said Manuel, "is their fear of our union with the Latins, of the warlike nations of the West, who may arm for our relief and for their destruction."¹⁰ Because they recognized that the partisans of Orthodoxy were crushingly superior in numbers and power, Manuel II and his successor John VIII vainly tried to unite the Eastern with Western churches and save the Byzantine Empire from a tragic end.

By this time, Islam was already the third religion of the Balkans. Catholic “hegemony” extended only into parts of Bosnia, the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik), the Adriatic and Aegean islands, and parts of Transylvania. Orthodoxy was still untouched, and still the religion of the Byzantine Empire, Serbia, and the Romanian principalities. It seemed that the Ottomans were unstoppable in their push toward Central Europe. As expected, they brought with them unwanted winds of change. But Hunyadi-the-White Knight proved that the Turks could still be put down, and one further mini-crusade united Hungarian, Polish, and Wallachian armies to confront them at Varna in 1444. The cavalry skirmishes that took place there turned into a war when five hundred knights once again suffered the murderous fate that others had at Nicopolis. Their leader, the young Polish King Wladislaw, was eager to prove himself and so attempted to take Sultan Murad II prisoner, only to meet a violent death. His head was displayed in the capital of the Turkish Empire, and the Muslim population there praised Allah with songs and dances when they saw it. The defeat of the Christian crusaders by the Ottomans was perceived as the triumph of Islam over the religious infidels.

The Turks had superior military discipline that was strictly regulated by Muslim laws. They won at Varna, but at a price in human lives that made Sultan Murad lament, “May God never grant me another such victory.” In view of this, it is possible to speculate that if one more crusade had followed shortly after this, the Ottomans might have met their ultimate defeat, and the history of the Balkans would be different. It is important to note that Byzantine troops were absent from all of these mini-crusades—further evidence that the emperors from Constantinople did not want to provoke the fury of the Ottomans. It was better to maintain an almost submissive neutrality. Their complacency would, however, cost them their empire nine years later when, during the final siege of Constantinople, neither Hunyadi nor any other European leader was willing to help the Greeks against the Turks. Despite the many failures and disasters that followed, the crusades temporally united Eastern and Western Europe behind a common cause. The end of the crusades also brought an end to the era of knighthood and set in motion the era of the Renaissance.

In the meantime, the Byzantine Empire was reduced to a mere patch of land around its capital. It survived mostly because it harbored the headquarters of Orthodoxy, which by then was also at its lowest point with respect to the Catholic Church. This was most evident when, in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II assaulted the walls of Constantinople, and not a single military contingent or warship from the West came to the aid of the hapless, besieged citizens. The city possessed an army of less than eight thousand (mostly mercenaries). These men faced the impossible task of fighting back more than one hundred

thousand Turks who were armed with almost one hundred heavy cannons. The Constantinopolitans rushed into their churches to pray for salvation. Inside the huge cathedral of Hagia Sophia people believed that “an angel would descend from Heaven with a sword in his hand and would deliver the empire, with that celestial weapon, to a poor man seated at the foot of the column. ‘Take this sword’ would he say, ‘and avenge the people of the Lord.’”¹¹ But the victorious swords were wielded by another lord, and they swung outside the Theodosian Wall. The apocalyptic event was taken to be God’s punishment for the sins of Constantinopolitans. Their prayers were no substitute for the military force needed to stop the Ottomans from capturing the city of Constantine, where Christianity had become an official state religion eleven centuries earlier.

Secretly, many Greeks preferred Ottoman rule. It imposed much lower taxes than the greedy and corrupt Byzantines had. Their wish was soon to be granted: the Turks broke into the magnificent cathedral and took the worshippers captive as they clung to their crosses. This marked the end of the Byzantine Empire. Constantinople was no longer “the shrine city” for Orthodoxy; from then on, its Orthodoxy was subject to the benevolence of the Mohammedans.¹² As a rule, the Turks wanted to replace the Byzantine Empire with an Ottoman one, and they cared little for any other commitment. The Serbs experienced this after helping the Turks conquer Constantinople (by providing sappers to dig under the walls); the Serbs believed themselves to be privileged allies, yet their aid brought nothing in return except Turkish raids in the territory of Zeta and, later, Ottoman occupation of the entirety of Serbia. A similar situation developed after 1479 when Mehmed II and the Venetians exchanged islands and lands in a peace treaty that put part of Albania, Morea, and Dalmatia under Ottoman control; Croia, Scutari, and Lemnosi went to the Turks, but almost before the ink had dried on the treaty, the sultan’s fleet and army invaded Rhodes and the heel of the Italian Peninsula.

Still, the Turks collaborated with the Orthodox Church; doing this, they felt, would keep the Balkan population in cultural numbness and in a state of social calm. The Turkish manipulation of the political system of the former empire had lasting effects on the Balkan way of thinking. Even though the people’s faith never diminished, it manifested itself in convoluted forms that were difficult for the Western world to understand or accept. Ottoman domination of the Balkans was considered a negative, but it eliminated the traditional wars between Bulgars, Croats, Greeks, Serbs, and other nationalities that were “pacified” by Islam. And certainly no armies of crusaders would again traverse the Balkan Peninsula and leave in their wake more disasters than any Turkish army had. Moreover, any Christian who converted to Islam

was given substantial tax breaks—a powerful incentive to adherents of other religions as well. This wise policy was attributed to Sultan Mehmed II.

As a conqueror he finally sealed the foundations of a great Islamic empire; as a statesman he had created within it the structure of a new and enduring Islamic state, worthy in its institutions, traditions, and policies to succeed the imperial civilizations of classical Rome and Christian Greece, and indeed serving as a zealous protector of Orthodox Christendom.¹³

Mehmed II was anything but a devoted Muslim. He drank in excess, and alcohol quickly sapped his health and made him prematurely obese. He died during an afternoon prayer on May 4, 1481, at the age of forty-nine. Nevertheless, he put in place the foundation of a mammoth inter-religious and multi-racial Millet system that creatively accommodated people with specific duties and needs. The result was the Balkan *talmesh-balmesh* (hodgepodge) that is still little understood by outsiders.

North of the Danube, the Romanians kept the flag of Orthodoxy raised high, and between 1462 and 1483 they scored some major victories against the invading Turkish armies. Ultimately, Moldavia and Wallachia came to pay tribute to the Sublime Porte, but their Orthodoxy remained intact; Islam and Catholicism never took root among the Romanians and Vlachs. King Matthias tried in vain to impose his Catholicism on the Serbs who preferred to accept Turkish occupation since it gave them the religious freedom to remain Orthodox. As for Mount Athos, the peninsular fortress of Orthodoxy with almost two hundred churches and monasteries built by Greeks, Bulgars, Russians, and others, it remained untouched by the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans; it was a sacred place for Orthodox believers and pilgrims. Regrettably, the crusaders and Christian pirates destroyed most of the Orthodox religious sites, but some survived the vicissitudes of time and are still intact today.

An overview of these events reveals that, when barbarian rulers were enthroned by *Dei Gratia Regina*/By the Grace of God and given unlimited power, Christianity became the foundation for new states. It was not that the barbarian mob chose Christianity, but rather that their chieftains imposed it on them. Likewise, it was not the priests who influenced the barbarian world, but the rulers whose military power defined a certain historical path for their nations. The rivalry between Catholicism and Orthodoxy was the cause of most of the man-made disasters that occurred in the Balkan area. From the Iconoclasm to the Great Schism, there was perpetual conflict between East and West. It was aggravated by barbarian invasions, forced conversions, crusades in Palestine and Europe, the Inquisition, and ultimately, the wars

against Islam. But, the Great Schism did more than divide the European Christian church: culturally and socially, it divided the East from West, and in the end produced people in each region of Europe who had different mentalities and ways of life. The Christian Church had ready answers for everything, including plagues, floods, famines, earthquakes, wars, and other disasters—they were all God’s punishments for sinners who did not sufficiently obey the Church. It was the spiritual voice of the state; its bureaucratic edicts reflected the voice of God and thus ensured that no one could oppose them, and it remained the strongest institution of the Middle Ages. After the fall of Constantinople, Mehmed II and many sultans after him did not try to weaken Orthodoxy. Instead they chose to use it as a symbol of power and as a spiritual tool against the Catholic Church.

Islam initiated its own Renaissance in the ninth century, with extraordinary developments in the arts, architecture, literature, astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy. It was immensely progressive for the next four centuries, after which, like Orthodoxy, it withdrew from the rest of the world and became ensconced in a sort of time capsule. As the Catholics and later the Protestants marched forward to improve their earthly lives, Orthodox Christians accepted their lot and thanked God for what they had, praying that things would not worsen. Tradition was good, change might not be; and when change did come, it tended to result from earthshaking events in distant locations. The world’s great powers were at work on deciding a global present and future, while the people of the Balkans lived in a glorified past that justified their religious and political convictions and their ongoing ethnic conflicts. Even today, their cherished traditions continue to accompany the Balkan people wherever they live.¹⁴

NOTES

1. When the Magyars resisted Christianity, Stephen/Istvan proved merciless with his pagans. He punished them, confiscated their settlements and gave the land to the Church. This prompted an anti-Christian revolt in 1046 under a tribal chief named Vatha. He refused to comply with the religious regime imposed upon him by the Hungarian king. His tribesmen were forcefully dispersed throughout Pannonia by King Andras I as part of an effort to defuse their power.

2. Matthew Spinka, *A History of Christianity in the Balkans: A Study in the Spread of Byzantine Culture Among the Slavs* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), 168.

3. Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 450.

4. Russia remained a primitive country until Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725) opened a window to the west by building Petrograd. He westernized his nation by force.

5. Timothy Levi Biel, *The Crusades* (San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1996), 111.
6. To this day, the Greeks and other Orthodox nations will never forgive, nor forget, their humiliation at the hands of the Catholic occupiers; few of them can visit Venice without pointing out pillaged objects from Constantinople.
7. Philippe Aries, Georges Duby, Paul Veyne, eds., *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 433.
8. Eight hundred years later, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a speech, on September 12, 2006, in which he quoted Emanuel in his book, *Twenty-six Dialogues with a Persian* (Dialogue 7). There the Emperor stated: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." His comment was merely intended to point to medieval prejudice, but it generated outrage in the Muslim world; the pope subsequently apologized and visited Turkey where he prayed at the Blue Mosque.
9. Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: Methuen & Co., 1934), 77.
10. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 1176.
11. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1212.
12. Again, the modern Greeks cannot forget or forgive that their beloved Constantinople, renamed Istanbul, is still under Turkish occupation.
13. Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1977), 158.
14. The entire phenomenon may go deeper if one considers the intermixing of the aboriginals with the Asiatic occupiers. It created a genetic type that possesses certain instincts and habits of thought and behavior not found in Western Europe or elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon world. The influence of genetics on human behavior is now beyond dispute. It just may be that Orthodoxy subdued the barbarian gods, but belief in them and the behaviors of those gods continue to be passed on through the genes, or mother's milk, of those whose ancestry was renewed in the Balkans.

Chapter Nine

The End of an Empire

After the year 500, the former Roman Empire was mainly ruled by the papacy from Rome and by emperors from the city of Constantinople. During the reign of Justinian I, it encompassed the regions around the Adriatic, Aegean, Black, and Mediterranean seas, including Italy, southern Spain, northern Africa, Egypt, Syria, the entirety of Asia Minor, and the area south of the Crimean Peninsula. At the time of Justinian's death, it covered 2.07 million square kilometers and had a population of 19.5 million; it also had a regular army of 379,000 permanent troops.¹ The rich farm lands and prosperous cities of the Italic Peninsula attracted countless barbarian tribes, mainly German Lombards, who plundered and pillaged the northern region. Muslim tribes made bold conquests throughout North Africa and Spain, all of which reduced the size and power of the tri-continental empire.

Despite its Latin sounding name, *Imperium Romanum*, the empire of the East, was centered in the Balkan Peninsula and unified by the Greek language. Latin was used primarily for affairs of state and scholarly studies. Non-Greek speaking people were referred to as "barbarians" and, according to the history written by Niketas Choniates (1155–1216), they all wanted to destroy the Byzantine civilization. Niketas also makes it clear that he viewed the Greeks in the same way he did the Romans, destined to match the glorious legacy of Rome. Implicitly, the former eastern half of the Roman Empire was to be known as the Byzantine Empire, and the Latins consisted mainly of the Italians and their kin.

An important factor contributing to the imperial unification of the Eastern Empire was the Eastern Orthodox Church with its religious center in the Phanar district of Constantinople. The city's colossal Theodosian Walls were built in the fifth century during the reign of Theodosius II as additions to other, pre-existing ones. They could thwart any attack from land. The city's

immense basilica of Hagia Sophia (Sacred Wisdom) was completed by Justinian in 562. These were the largest man-made structures in medieval Europe and both were symbols of Constantinople's invincibility. The magnificent metropolis was known not only by the name Constantinople, but also as *Nova Roma* (New Rome) and by its ancient name of Byzantium/Byzantion. With a population of 375,000, it was strategically located on a mini-peninsula that almost reached to Asia Minor across the Strait of the Bosphorus. It offered religious and royal glamour, a level of sophistication that initially mesmerized the barbarian chieftains who wanted to be connected to it and hoped to duplicate it in order to demonstrate their power and impress their subjects. This prosperous city was effectively able to control all maritime traffic between the Black and Mediterranean seas. But, its strategic commercial location also made it the target of countless attacks. Goths, Persians, multitudes of Slavs, and other hungry armies kept renewing their efforts to besiege the "city of lights," a citadel that seemed to defy conquest. Indeed, it was the only city that was illuminated throughout the night, including its famous landmark, the Phanar district, which was named after its monumental lighthouse; there multi-nationalities of privileged and wealthy resided and remained minimally affected by the changes that occurred over time.

What made Byzantium such a powerful state was its adoption of the Roman tradition of integrating conquered peoples into the empire. In the Roman Empire, as long as people obeyed the law and paid taxes, all ethnicities could retain their language, culture, and religion, and travel freely throughout the provinces. Democratic institutions or doctrines of equal rights might not have existed at this time, but any brave soldier, skillful artisan, or competent trader could be respected and live well. Artists, intellectuals, and foreigners with special talents were welcomed and often became famous citizens. The Roman systems of census, taxation, and budgeting were still in place in the Eastern Empire (anachronistically referred to as the Land of the Romans), as were a monetary economy and a centralized government. Most of its emperors had some Armenian, Greek, Macedonian, and Roman blood, and came to power either as a result of heredity or military acclaim. Their dynasties proved able to withstand many court intrigues and fratricidal wars. These conflicts would ultimately be extinguished by the Orthodox theocracy. After all, the incoming Asiatic attacks had been successfully repelled, and it appeared that Constantinople, which had survived the ravages of time, would remain invincible. However, history proved otherwise.

The downfall of the Byzantine Empire actually started at the time of its birth, when Eurasian migratory tribes swept like incoming tides across Eastern Europe and the Balkans and continued to do so for five centuries. Since they were hell bent on gaining ever more booty, they left behind one ghost

city after another, and showed no mercy toward their captives. These invading hordes used terror as a means of psychological warfare in their effort to ease their next conquests. Their raw barbarian power consisted in massive and highly mobile mounted warriors that outnumbered those of the Byzantine armies which were generally on foot. They repeatedly inflicted genocides on most of the Byzantine provinces, destroying productive manpower, setting farms in flames, and ruining economy and trade. Needless to say, this reduced the empire to a state of chaos. Moreover, three consecutive bubonic plagues (in the years 542, 558, and 588) ravaged the city of Constantinople, cutting in half the number of its citizens and shrinking the population of the entire Eastern Empire.

All the while, the Byzantine Empire's overstretched and reduced armed forces (often in a state of mutiny) struggled to fight off savage barbarians and other unwelcome intruders on all fronts. Ostrogoths and Vandals were pouring into the West while the Avars besieged Singidunum (Belgrade) and Thessaloniki (Salonika). During the reign of Maurice (r. 582–602), the Slavs conquered Sirmium (Stremska Mitrovica) and raided the Peloponnese. They also sacked Dalmatia, Greece, Macedonia, Moesia, Pannonia, and Thracia, and destroyed many prosperous Balkan cities before they reached the Long Wall some 60 kilometers west of Constantinople. This forced the Byzantines to revoke the Roman dictum, "After God, we should place our hopes of safety in our weapons, not in our fortifications alone."² General Priscus's numerous retaliatory campaigns produced mixed results, as cities and territories changed hands repeatedly. He forced the invaders to re-direct their paths of destruction and commanded the imperial army to divide and fight from the Mediterranean island of Crete to the Tisza River of Pannonia and the city of Tomis (Constanta) below the delta of the Danube. More problematic was the fact that each time a war was being waged against Arab expansion into Asia Minor, the empire was short of troops in the Balkans. Byzantine military victories and signed accords with the defeated barbarians guaranteed nothing when it came to actually containing and ruling the illiterate invaders. When the empire was forced to buy peace, it found itself short of money. The result was mutiny amongst its troops. Not surprisingly, the Slavs fully exploited this and any other opportunity to inflict new blows on the weak empire.

During his long reign, Heraclius had to contend with many types of irreversible damage that already had been done to the empire. To this was added the capture of Damascus and Jerusalem by the Persians, an event which marked the historic ascent of Islam. Its armies proceeded to conquer ever more Byzantine lands in the name of Allah. Fortunately, the territorial loss that resulted was in Asia Minor and so less than vital to the Byzantines. They regarded the Balkans as their primary territory—one that was now under

threat from the Avars. In 617 the barbarians succeeded in attacking Constantinople and forced Heraclius to pay them in exchange for a temporary peace. Given that there was a lull in military activities in the Balkans, he was able to withdraw his army from there and proceed to liberate Jerusalem from Persian occupation. But in 626 the Persians engaged the Avars to besiege Constantinople, allowing them to land troops on the eastern shore of the Bosphorus. Both of these attacks were successfully repelled by Heraclius. He also scored a major victory the following year against the Persians at Nineveh when he personally killed their General Rihzadh in a duel; King Khustro II fled and was subsequently assassinated. Replicating the Persian tactic of tricking nomads into fighting on their behalf, Heraclius encouraged the Serb tribes to settle in the Balkans if they agreed to fight the Avars. It was a brilliant diversion—convenient at the time, but extremely damaging in the long run since it encouraged still another massive barbarian entity to carve out a large part of the empire and claim it for themselves.

Overall, Heraclius's victories were considerable. He was able to reconquer Jerusalem, keep Anatolia, and restore Constantinople to a position of dominance in the Balkans. His legacy was that he was the first emperor to fight against an Islamic army. Since he was of Armenian origin, he changed his royal title from the Roman *Augustus* (semi-divine) to *Basileus* (sovereign), and dropped Latin in favor of Greek as the official language of the Empire. Many of the other measures he introduced began to shape what would eventually become the Byzantine Empire's own unique form of government and identity. This religious emperor believed that once the invading Bulgars, Serbs, and Croats converted to Christianity and were allowed to settle in former Dacian Moesia between the Danube and the Haemus (Balkan) Mountains, they would become grateful subjects. But this error in judgment had hugely adverse and irreversible historical consequences. The baptized pagan chieftains demanded to be crowned kings and even emperors, and expected to be given an equal share of the Byzantine lands with concomitant privileges.

The Byzantine Empire began to decline in the year 638 in the distant Near East after Muslim troops occupied Jerusalem. The city was, of course, regarded as sacred by both Christian worlds, Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The armies of the caliphate under Omar the Great (r. 634–644) conquered Palestine, Byzantine Armenia, Egypt, Libya, Mesopotamia, and Syria, and Muslim armies also took over the southern section of Anatolia. At this point, the majority of the empire's lands in Asia Minor were lost forever. The beginning of the eighth century was marked by the firm rule of Justinian II. He used the army from what was now the reduced Anatolian province to discipline the Slavic hordes as they swarmed over the Balkan Peninsula. By the end of 689, he had expelled the Bulgars from Macedonia and retaken Thessaloniki

for Greece. Justinian relocated the Slavs that he had captured to Anatolia and forced them to fight the Arabs, whom he defeated in Armenia. However, the revolting Bulgars allied with the Muslim enemy and Armenia again came under Islam. Little did Justinian know that he would have to rely on these same Bulgars to regain his throne in 705 after he had executed emperors Leontius and Tiberius.

Justinian's second reign (705–711) was a costly one, as he needed the assistance of this former Slavic enemy to survive politically. He was forced to name Khan Tervel as Caesar and to turn over large portions of his empire to the Bulgar, Khanat. Repentant and attempting to rectify this mistake, he tried to subdue the Slavs. He was, however, defeated and forced to accept a less than glorious peace. The Arabs took advantage of this situation and invaded Cappadocia. Justinian was then confronted with an internal revolt. Hastening back from the campaign in Armenia, he was executed by a rival faction as he approached Constantinople, before he had a chance to reclaim his royal scepter. His six year-old son, who was co-emperor at the time, was dragged from the church altar where his mother had taken him for shelter, and murdered. The Heraclian dynasty thus came to an abrupt and brutal end.

By the spring of 717, the Muslims had succeeded in invading the Iberian Peninsula, and, taking thorough advantage of the internal turmoil in Byzantium, caused the Arab armies to stage a second invasion of Constantinople. They possessed a fleet of some twenty-five hundred ships and an army of two hundred thousand. They forced Leo III (r. 717–741) to ally with the savage Bulgars to repel the invasion by land, and at the same time, have his navy use the deadly Greek fire to destroy the enemy ships on the sea. An unusually harsh winter decimated the ranks of the Arabs as they were ill-adapted to the climate and simply gave up the siege. As they retreated, they were battered by a fierce storm that sank all but five of their ships and killed most of their troops. Once again, the prayers of the Constantinopolitans (many of whom were now sheltered inside the Hagia Sophia) had been answered. But this humiliating defeat of the Arab armies set a precedent for an Islamic Jihad (Holy War), and also defined the agenda of future sultans.

The next ten emperors, all of whom were tormented by countless inner court intrigues, were confronted with international dangers of no less significance. Nicephorus I had to confront the Venetians and Franks while losing a war against the Arabs in Asia Minor, and buy peace with an annual tribute. The Bulgars took full advantage of the hard-pressed emperor and attacked southward, conquering Serdica (Sofia), only to be pushed back and lose their own capital Pliska in 811. As it happened, while the Byzantine army was on its way back home, it was ambushed by the Bulgarians, and Nikephoros was killed in the battle. Khan Krum, the Czar of the Bulgarians celebrated his victory by drinking wine from the emperor's skull, marking one of the

lowest points in the empire's history. By 865 even the remotely located Russians had attacked Constantinople. They would do so again in 907, 941, 944 and 1043,

to plunder the treasures of Constantinople: the event was various, but the motive, the means, and the object were the same in these naval expeditions. The Russian traders had seen the magnificence and tasted the luxury of the city of the Caesars. A marvelous tale and a scanty supply excited the desires of their savage countrymen: they envied the gifts of nature which their climate denied; they coveted the works of art which they were too lazy to imitate and too indigent to purchase.³

These, together with other barbarian invasions that led to large foreign settlements and unfavorable military outcomes, caused Byzantium to lose nearly half of its territory and its population in the course of two centuries. Nevertheless, the Eastern Empire still appeared large and powerful since it encompassed most of Greece, the region that had formerly been Thracia south of the Rhodope Mountains, most of Anatolia all the way to Cyprus, and the area extending from the northeast coast of the Black Sea all the way to the Caucasus Mountains. With a mammoth bureaucracy and state treasury now taking in only one fourth of its previous revenues, the empire could afford to pay fewer than eighty thousand soldiers,⁴ clearly not enough to maintain its authority and enforce its will. The military discipline that had been a hallmark of the Roman army was now only a distant memory. Of increasing importance was the incipient religious dispute with Rome over the worship of icons. It became a reason for the division between Eastern and Western Europe.

The tenth century began with Arab pirates plundering Thessaloniki in 904 and occupying Cyprus until 965. It was through the bravery of two Armenian generals, later known as the emperors Nicephorus II (r. 963–969) and John I (r. 969–976), that the large territories of Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Syria were returned to Byzantine control. These soldier-emperors destroyed the supremacy of the Arab fleet and restored the power of the Byzantine navy in the eastern Mediterranean. However, attacks from marauding Slavs continued to plague the empire and even threaten its existence. The religious issue of iconoclasm was meanwhile settled in favor of the Orthodox Church—little consolation compared to impact of the barbarian invasions and the hordes of unwanted migrants. They created irreversible cultural and demographic changes that initiated a process of slow death for the Byzantine Empire.

By the beginning of the eleventh century, Basil II had succeeded in restoring the Eastern Empire to its previous dignity. His reign was initially marked by personal and imperial humiliations. He was overshadowed by powerful relatives and blackmailed by enemies while dealing with mutiny and civil war. He repeatedly lost military expeditions against the land hungry Bulgarians who ruled the Byzantine regions from the Danube River to the Adriatic

and Black seas and also controlled central Greece. But he learned precious lessons from all of this, and after the year 1000, he made a spectacular comeback. He proved his first class generalship by regaining Macedonia (his homeland) and part of Moesia, including Preslav, the former Bulgarian capital. In 1014 he firmly defeated the Bulgarians at Kleidon in Macedonia and blinded some fifteen thousand prisoners to teach them a lesson in respect for imperial authority. When they returned to their homeland (led by a few one-eyed comrades), the spectacle of their mass punishment caused Czar Samuil to collapse and die of a heart attack. But, in spite of all this, it took Basil *Boulgaroktonos* (the Bulgar Slayer) four more years to subdue the Bulgars and Serbs. Once again, the northern border of the Byzantine Empire was the line formed by the Danube River as it flowed from Belgrade eastward to its delta on the Black Sea. Under his rule, the empire reached the apogee of its medieval power and territorial size; it extended from the heel and toe of the boot of Italy to Crete and Cyprus, encompassed the areas of Syria and Anatolia all the way to the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, and also included part of the Crimean Peninsula. All of this was a result of the emperor's skillful rule.

Basil was a soldier's soldier: he lived and thought like his men. He provided for the children of his deceased officers who had served him well. Later, his troops became fanatically loyal to this adopted "Father of the Army," an army that numbered as many as three hundred thousand men and protected eighteen million Byzantines. He also re-conquered Byzantine Armenia, Syria, and Southern Italy and forced the Arabs and Turks back repeatedly until they no longer posed a threat. Each time he reached a peace accord, its terms were imposed with an iron fist. In doing so, he duplicated the grand achievement of Charlemagne who two hundred years earlier had united Central and Western Europe into the Holy Roman Empire. At this point in history, the Orthodox Empire seemed to be rising to great heights; indeed, it was on its way to a new golden age. Constantinople, as opposed to either Athens or Rome (all of which were built on seven hills), was the ultimate European metropolis. However, its cultural splendors and riches also made it the ultimate target for ever increasing numbers of barbarian attacks. Unfortunately, Basil never married and so left no children. Because his close relatives had only daughters, the throne was succeeded by a number of inferior and weak sovereigns.

It began with his brother Constantine VIII (r. 1025–1028), who proved to be decadent and incompetent; he passed the scepter to his two daughters, Zoe and Theodora. They were bitterly jealous of each other, first marrying and then killing three emperor husbands. They kept exiling and torturing each other while recklessly emptying the empire's treasury, diminishing the size of regular army, and hiring mercenaries to repel invaders. A sudden schism in 1054 between the Catholic and Orthodox churches severed the Byzantine

Empire from the rest of Europe and forced the Eastern Empire to do battle on their own against the increasing number of enemies attacking from all directions. Its borders continued to shrink while Constantinople, separated by less than one mile of water from Asia Minor, was increasingly vulnerable to Muslim attacks from Anatolia.

Thus far the Turks had been busy fighting their own wars, but now they were strong enough to raid and occupy the empire's many provinces in Asia Minor. Emperor Romanus IV carried out some successful campaigns against them and contemptuously refused to aid the Seljuks in their fight against the Shiites in Egypt. He decided instead to re-conquer Armenia and led his army into Anatolia where, in 1071, he suffered a surprising but a catastrophic defeat at Manzikert. The overconfident emperor was himself taken prisoner and humiliated by Sultan Alp Arslan. He forced Romanus to the ground and triumphantly planted his foot on the emperor's neck. This symbolic gesture destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the imperial army and opened the floodgates for Muslim incursions into Anatolia and the occupation of Jerusalem by the Seljuks. Yet, the sultan treated Romanus with understanding and even released him to continue his emperorship in exchange for a friendly treaty and ransom. This made him the enemy of his own nation. He could not suppress an imminent civil war, and after being blinded by a throne contender clan and the emperor was exiled.

From any standpoint, the next emperors, who engaged in reckless spending and lavish living, were all in political trouble and needed help, even if they still had the power to crown barbarian kings of Slavic nations. In a brief paragraph, Anna Comnena described how "great disorders and wave on wave of confusion united to afflict our affairs. For the Scyths from the north, the Kelts from the west and the Ishmaelites from the east were simultaneously in turmoil. Whenever they find an opportunity, all of them, by land or sea, flock from all quarters to attack us."⁵ Desperation forced her father, Emperor Alexius I (r. 1081–1118), to turn to the West for assistance; by this point, it understood the increasingly menacing Turkish presence as a threat to the future of Europe. Pope Urban II took advantage of the religious pathos associated with liberating the Holy Land from Muslim occupation and set in motion the first crusade. It established the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1099.

During his long reign Manuel I (r. 1143–1180) continued the policy of his father, John II, and sought to correct the damages done by previous emperors. He succeeded in ruling over most of the Balkan Peninsula (less Croatia and Slovenia) by battling the Hungarians and Sicilians while at the same time subduing the rebel Serbs. Because he anticipated the rising military power of Islam in Anatolia and was unable to defeat the Turks, the emperor stimulated hostilities among their leaders and befriended Sultan Kilidj Arslan; the latter

spent eighty days in Constantinople as a royal guest. In a characteristic imperial manner aimed to impress, Manuel dazzled the primitive Seljuk with rich displays of the culture of Constantinople and bestowed lavish gifts on him. This only attracted the sultan's envy and greed, it implanted in his mind thoughts of how much wealth could be plundered from the glamorous metropolis. There developed an unrealistic myth about the colossal wealth that was waiting for the right conqueror in the Byzantine capital or the megalopolises of Adrianople, Athens, Thessaloniki, and others.

Up to this point in time, the popes from Rome and the emperors from Constantinople competed in anointing the kings and other rulers in the Balkans, as well as throughout most of Eastern Europe. The Byzantines soon would lose that supreme privilege as they faced domestic and international challenges they could not solve, and thus saw their ruling status diminished. Most of the problems proved to be internal to the royal family. The eleven year-old Emperor Alexius II, who followed his father to the purple, was dominated and manipulated by his uncle Andronicus, the first cousin of Manuel I. During his short reign, the envious Greeks massacred many of the sixty thousand Latins of Constantinople, the majority of them being Venetian merchants, thereby incurring the ceaseless wrath of Western Europe. As an immediate punishment, the Normans occupied Thessaloniki, the empire's second city, thus opening a path for more retaliatory attacks that would culminate in the conquest of Constantinople in 1204.

Meanwhile, Andronicus kept a jealous eye on his teenage nephew, whom he ended up strangling. He then installed a reign of terror (1183–1185) which aimed at diminishing the power of high-born nobility, thus unwittingly defending the peasants from predatory landlords and preventing the rich from making any claim to the throne. In an attempt to avenge the twelve years he spent in prison for conspiring against Manuel, he relished his hold on power, not hesitating to fulfill his enormous appetite for cruelty and revenge. Ironically, this tyrant's removal from power was the result of a popular rebellion; he was tortured for three days—his eyes were put out, his teeth and hair pulled out, his right hand cut off, and his handsome face burned with hot water, and, after all this, he was hanged between two large pillars of the Hippodrome. His co-emperor son was executed by his own troops in Thracia. It was in this bloody manner that the Comnenus dynasty came to an end, with the last reserves of gold (twelve hundred pounds of gold; three thousand pounds of silver; and twenty thousand pounds of copper coins) stolen by the revolting mob. According to Niketas, the source of these historic details, the victorious rebels plundered the royal armories and the palace, including its icons.

As a consequence of all this, the next emperor, Isaac II Angelos (r. 1185–1195 and 1203–1204) had to deal with the contemptuous Normans whom

he had defeated. He had taken back Thessaloniki, but could do little about the Vlachs' tax rebellion in the former Dacian Moesia, now referred to as Bulgaria. They united with the Cumans and Wallachians from north of the Danube and pillaged Thracia and other imperial regions of Adrianople, Macedonia, Philippopolis, Rhodope, and Sardica. In the meantime, Isaac spent the funds from the state treasury recklessly. He gave overly generous donations to the churches and his people at the same time as he engaged in massive construction projects and financed mercenary armies to maintain order inside empire and fight off the increasingly aggressive Vlachs. Eventually, in order to refill the imperial treasury he had to mint coins that had essentially no monetary value and was also forced to offer imperial positions to the highest bidders regardless of qualifications. Niketas is also the source of information on what followed. Overwhelmed by his responsibilities, Isaac transferred them to his uncle Theodore Kastamonitis, who assumed royal powers while the emperor indulged a life of luxury and became an addict of refined cuisines, pleasurable baths, hunting trips, and other expensive pastimes. He was renowned for not wearing the same clothes twice. This lifestyle attracted the envy of his brother Alexius, whom the emperor had treated exceptionally well, but to no avail.

After ambushing his naively overconfident brother and blinding him during a hunting trip, Alexius III became his successor (r. 1195–1203); he was an emperor with a still greater capacity for self-destruction. He emptied what remained of the treasury and enriched himself by acts of wholesale bribery that extended even to commoners. His ultimate aim was to enjoy the good life. Naturally, this further weakened the feeble empire. Alexius paid little attention to the affairs of state, and the Bulgars, Hungarians, Serbs, Vlachs, and other nationalities could practically dictate their territorial demands to Constantinople.

A series of unsuccessful crusades ensued, ultimately doing more harm than good to the Byzantines, who were now increasingly subject to Turkish threat. Yet, Constantinople continued to be referred to as the "Queen of the Cities" and retained its enviable maritime power. It controlled commercial traffic on both the left and right sides of the Straits, and also the isthmus of the Golden Horn, the natural moat of safety for sailing ships. Whenever the city blocked its harbors, troops involved in a land assault were doomed to linger around its massive fortified walls and starve, or give up altogether. The often cited rule of thumb, "He who controls the seas controls the world," was certainly played out in Constantinople, the vital center of what was now *Imperium Graecorum* (the Empire of the Greeks). In reality, however, this region was a land of many new ethnicities that revolted against existing authority and unsuccessfully attacked the city. Such conflicts occurred continually until

1204, when the capital was sacked not by Asian pagans, but by its Christian Western European allies.

In an irony of history, the army of the fourth crusade, under the octogenarian Enrico Dandolo, the blind Venetian doge, sailed not to Egypt, but to Constantinople to reinstate Emperor Isaac II and his son Alexius IV, who promised in exchange a huge reward in gold and military aid. Alexius, who visited the French and German royalties, also assured the Latin crusaders that he would subordinate the Orthodox Church to the Rome papacy. To prove his pledge, he adopted Catholicism, a gesture that must have been insulting to the Byzantines. True to their word, the crusaders arrived with their ships in the harbor of Constantinople at the end of May 1203. They were “greeted” by torrents of arrows and other missiles launched from atop the city walls. Greek fire prevented the ships from landing troops and forced the assailants to change tactics. Since they encountered no resistance from land, the knights challenged the massive walls with stone-throwing engines and, when the defenders ventured outside the fortifications, cavalry charges were loosed upon them. In mid-July, Emperor Alexius III also failed to make good with his promised payments. Finally, in desperation, he decided to break the line around the city, only to be chased back by the superior Latin forces. With the Seljuk Turks attacking from the east and the Vlachians raiding Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Thracia, the emperor was running out of options and decided to take whatever was left of the depleted treasury (one thousand pounds of gold and precious gems) and abdicate his responsibility to the city. His brother Isaac II, whom he had imprisoned and blinded, was re-seated on the throne along with his son Alexius IV. Unable to deliver the substantial payments he had promised the eager crusaders, Alexius essentially robbed the provinces he had control over. But he still could not meet the demands of his benefactors. They entered the city and set punitive fires in many districts, which triggered a mass revolt against the crusaders and the two emperors. The blind elderly emperor was again thrown into prison, while Alexius IV, who had reigned a mere six months and eight days, was strangled by Alexius V Doukas, the general whom both the old and young emperors had trusted would save them from the angry crowd and the fury of the crusaders.

At this dramatic juncture, the great imperial capital of one hundred fifty thousand citizens witnessed a civic upheaval; its thirty thousand soldiers—dispersed to all provinces of the empire—were in no position to repel the powerful western Christian army, which would prove to be more savage than any barbarians. Alexius V was elected by the Constantinopolitans to fight the Latin invaders who asked for five thousand pounds of gold—a demand that was impossible to meet. In their frustration the crusaders began plundering the outskirts of the capital and on April 9, 1204 (the year 6712 on the Byz-

antine calendar), they stormed the city. While this was happening, the new emperor was sailing away to safety. His bravery was not in question since none of the Greek citizens wanted to join his battle against invaders. The city was captured four days later while its inhabitants were still congregated inside numerous churches, praying to sacred icons for their deliverance from the swords of the crusaders. But, instead of deliverance, they experienced an appalling fate at the hands of their co-religious occupiers. The crusaders were now on mission to confiscate any valuables they could as “they plundered with impunity and stripped their victims shamelessly, beginning with their carts. Not only did they rob them of their substance but also the articles consecrated to God,” wrote the eye-witness historian Niketas. He had reason to lament:

O, the shameful dashing to earth of the venerable icons and the flinging of the relics of the saints, who had suffered for Christ’s sake, into defiled places!... These forerunners of Anti-Christ, chief agents and harbingers of his anticipated ungodly deeds, seized as plunder the precious chalices and patens; some they smashed, taking possession of the ornaments embellishing them, and they set the remaining vessels on their tables to serve as bread dishes and wine goblets.⁶

Mules were led inside St. Sophia Cathedral where their excrement would soil the polished marble floors while they were loaded with gold, silver, and precious stones removed from the altars. In addition to considering it their legitimate right to plunder the city, the invaders were seeking revenge and retribution for the prior massacre and destruction carried out by the Greeks of the Latin colony of Galata. A large portion of Constantinople was set afire. In the stormy winds, it became literally a city of light as flames illuminated acts of plunder and rape committed in apocalyptic proportions. Only a few survivors were able to escape to Greece. The Saint Sophia cathedral was further stripped of its sacred objects wrought in silver and gold; even the frames of paintings and moldings on the walls were removed. The four large bronze horses that had beautified the hippodrome since the time of Constantine were confiscated and transported to Venice to adorn Saint Mark’s Basilica.

The last Byzantine Emperor, Alexius V, who reigned two months and sixteen days during the siege of Constantinople, escaped and sought shelter with his father-in-law Alexius III. The latter eliminated his competition for the throne by blinding him. Totally helpless, Alexius V was captured by the crusaders during a raid in Thracia and brought back to Constantinople to stand trial for imprisoning and killing Alexius IV. His death sentence was carried out to satisfy the mob: he was thrown from the top of a high column in the Forum of the Bull. His body crashed on the stone pavement, ending the life

of the only Byzantine emperor who had dared to fight the crusaders. Constantinople and Rome were no longer imperishable centers of civilization. Their legendary days of superpower were now a faded memory.

The sacking of Constantinople marked the beginning of the end of the Byzantine Empire. A new Latin Empire would be created on the two mini-peninsulas of the Straits of the Bosphorus, ruled first by Baldwin of Flanders and subsequently (over the next six decades) by five other western emperors. The rest of the land was partitioned into small states under the aegis of the most prominent knights and Venetians, as was done in Western Europe. Almost overnight, there appeared the Despotate of Epirus and the subsidiary empires of Nicaea and Trebizond which followed the Byzantine tradition. The kingdoms of Cyprus and Thessalonica, the Principality of Achaea, along with other small provinces were organized under both Latin and Greek rulers. The Venetians controlled roughly one-third of the former empire's islands, and the Seljuks occupied part of Anatolia, now referred to as the Sultanate of Rum (Sultanate of Romans *sic*). Beginning in 1220, this area came to be known by westerners as Turchia (the modern English pronunciation is Turkey). Yet, Nicaea remained strong enough to keep the Turks at bay and so ensured Greek supremacy along the eastern shores of the Aegean and Black seas. Personal quarrels and feudal tensions between Greek and Latin rulers eventually escalated into new disasters as the power of empire continued to wane.

The old divisions within the Balkan region were further undermined by the increased strength of the Vlachs who were helped by their co-nationalists from north of the Danube and by opportunistic Cuman cavalrymen. Their leader Ioannitsa, a king of Moesian Vlachia, was called by the self-exiled Byzantines of Thracia to defend them against the Latin army. It was commanded by Emperor Baldwin I with the assistance of Count Louis I of Blois and Doge Enrico Dandolo. The battle took place near Adrianople on April 14, 1205; the crusaders were so badly defeated that the emperor was taken prisoner (and later executed). The count was killed in action, and the old doge died of exhaustion while making his escape. Ioannitsa crushed another Latin army at Serres (Syr) and also successfully stormed Philippopolis (Plovdiv). Proclaiming himself Emperor of the Vallachian lands, Kaloyan (meaning Ioannitsa the Handsome) occupied much of the territory of the Latin Empire in Thrace, Macedonia, and "Thessaly which now are called Great Vlachia and ruled over the inhabitants there"⁷ (the Vlachs).

Yet another barbarian power came to the fore when a Mongolian ruler changed his name from Temuchin to Genghis Khan (r. 1206–1227), the title, meaning the Universal Ruler, reflecting the fact that he had conquered vast territories in central Asia. He laid waste to Persia and thus spared the Byzan-

tines from further devastation at the hands of another mortal enemy. After his death, the Blue Horde of Batu Khan descended into Eastern Europe. There they raided Russia and Poland, occupied Bulgaria, and after almost entirely eliminating Hungarians, concluded their mission with an attack on Vienna. After pillaging the rest of the Balkan states, a splinter group of the Golden Horde ended up in Anatolia where in 1243 it crushed the Seljuks of Rum. Thus, the Mongols had unwittingly annihilated the primary enemies of Constantinople and so ensured its survival for the next two hundred years.

The enfeebled Latin Empire, reduced to patches of land surrounding Constantinople, continued to fight off numerous assaults from its former Balkan vassals, now its dangerous neighbors. Taking advantage of the fact that the Latin troops were away on a mission of conquest, a Greek army entered the city in July 1261 almost unopposed and forced Emperor Baldwin II into exile. In desperate need of money, he had stripped even the lead roofing from his palace. The Venetian borough was once again plundered and mostly reduced to ashes in an effort to confirm that the period of Latin domination was over. The royal scepter then passed to Michael VIII (r. 1259–1282), who was able to retrieve a few glowing embers of the Byzantine Empire from what remained around Constantinople. He quickly restored Orthodoxy and the Greek language as official state institutions. His coat of arms, featuring the double-headed eagle, became the symbol of his bicentennial Paleologus dynasty. For the remainder of his reign, however, he was unsuccessful in his attempt to reconcile with Catholicism and so to keep Rome aligned with him and against the Ottomans. Given that the last crusade had failed in Asia Minor in 1272, he concluded that any further help was not likely to be forthcoming from the West. For the most part, Michael was preoccupied with fighting the Greek states that refused to submit to the restored Byzantine Empire; he also recaptured lands south of the Balkan Mountains and throughout Greece.

His son Andronikos II (r. 1282–1328) understood the importance of the Orthodox Church and also of taxation. He fully exploited the former, but failed at the latter because his empire had become almost totally impoverished by wars and unsustainable economic pressures. He was desperate to pay his mercenary army, and so disbanded the Byzantine fleet in 1284. This proved to be a blunder of incredible proportions—one from which the empire would never recover. For all practical purposes, it made Constantinople dependent on a foreign navy (mainly the Genoese and Venetian fleets) as far as its receiving supplies by water. It also made it unable to defend its two shores from maritime attacks. The only option was that non-Greek war ships come to the rescue.

Many of Constantinople's beloved treasures were pawned or sold in the West to pay its bloated and inept bureaucracy and subsidize its pitifully weak

mercenary army. The official coinage of the empire, the *hyperpyra*, once in great demand, was now being minted with only 50 percent gold. To make matters worse, a royal feud developed between Andronici II and III, and it degenerated into a bloody civil war, one that divided the already shrunken empire. Eventually, Andronicus III (r. 1328–1341) replaced his grandfather. The latter was renamed Antony and died as a monk. The young Andronicus took the recklessness and lavishness of the imperial lifestyle to new heights. His reduced and impoverished empire had hardly survived the recent onslaughts and was in no position to repel the destructive advances of the Slavs and Turks. He tried to make a career for himself as a warrior but “pleasure rather than power was his aim; and maintaining a thousand hounds, a thousand hawks, and a thousand huntsmen was sufficient to sully his fame and disarm his ambition.” As he put it, “my grandsire will leave me nothing to lose.”⁸ The empire was clearly in a state of free fall—and its emperors seemed to be enjoying the ride.

Thus far in the history of the empire, the Turks of Anatolia, who lived in isolated emirates (states), had been kept in check by western mercenary armies hired by the Byzantines. But in 1300 the warlord of one tribe, Osman I (r. 1299–1326), decided to take advantage of the diminished Byzantine military presence in Asia Minor and form his own kingdom. His timing was perfect, as countless numbers of Turks, pulverized by the Golden Horde, were in search of a safe place to live and a ruler to lead them. His warriors quickly defeated the Byzantines near Nicaea in 1301, and after conquering Smyrna (today’s Izmir) and Brusa (renamed Bursa), they became familiar with tactics for besieging fortified cities. In the course of a royal feud between the two Andronici, the Turks were invited to end the civil war. This gave them an opportunity to see firsthand how weak and vulnerable the Byzantine Empire was. By the time of his death, Osman occupied much of Anatolia, which now stood for the new Ottoman (a Western mispronunciation of Osman) Empire. His son Orhan I (r. 1326–1362) inherited it, with its capital in Bursa.⁹ The Ottomans called Constantinople by its Turkish name *Kostantiniyye*, and their sultan, son of Gazi, the “Warrior of Allah.”

Many Anatolian Byzantines had taken refuge across the Bosphorus in the Balkans, so it was only a short time before Orhan would conquer Nicaea (Izmit) and Nicomedia (Izmit). This most capable leader is credited with the formation of the Janissary (a word derived from *Yeni Tscheri*, meaning “new soldiers”). From this point forward, it became the personal army of every sultan. It was a sort of Praetorian Guard which enlisted boys kidnapped from conquered tribes and nations. In the absence of their parents or country, they became fanatically loyal to their sultan. Ironically, this elite corps was formed

from non-Turkish fighters, most of them born Christians. Orhan's wisdom, combined with his military force, allowed him to extend his realm considerably. Many Turkish areas readily joined this growing Islamic Empire. Byzantine military campaigns succeeded in retaining some control over Asia Minor, thereby preventing the Turks from surrounding the Sea of Marmara. However, the Ottomans were a menace that could not be ignored, particularly since they were united by both the Islamic religion and capable leadership.

Still, the primary threat to the Byzantine Empire was to be found within it. In 1320 it encompassed only 9 percent of the land and 12 percent of the population that it had had in the year 457. Its army was now only seven thousand strong, a mere symbol for ceremonial duties.¹⁰ Western mercenaries who were hired to battle the Turks often plundered the Balkan lands because Byzantine emperors were not able to pay them. A case in point was the Catalans, who took over the Gallipoli Peninsula, and, after occupying Athens in 1311, established their own Duchy of Athens and Thebes. Given that they were short of manpower, they often relied on the Turks to help them to plunder the remainder of Greece. It was under these sad circumstances that the Byzantines lost Anatolia, and the Ottomans arrayed themselves on the east side of the Straits of the Bosphorus. They were to gaze greedily at the magnificent city across the waters.

The Turks, who were related to the Huns and Mongols (and by now were Muslims) did not have a legitimate claim to any of the Byzantine lands—and they were treated accordingly by the Europeans. But, since they had already settled in Anatolia—the former home of the Thracians—they also felt entitled to cross into the Balkan Peninsula as migrants. If they were not allowed to do so, just like the ancient Thracians, they would conquer it; this was a predictable and inescapable fact of history. The civil war of 1341–1347 between contenders to the Byzantine throne brought still more mercenaries to restore order inside the empire; hence the first Ottoman soldiers entered the Balkans by invitation. They helped Emperor John VI (r. 1347–1354) to gain power. The grateful emperor married his daughter to Orhan and recognized him as the only Turkish ruler.

By 1355 the Turks were allowed to visit Constantinople where they defiantly and openly displayed their ethnicity on the streets; most probably, they were also allowed to build the first mosque in the city. Their presence caused Czar Stefan Dusan (r. 1331–1355) to suspend his plans to attack Constantinople. He nevertheless took advantage of the civil war that was raging there and extended his Serbian Empire into Macedonia, Epirus, and Thessaly (Thessaloniki having been exempted). Thus he created his own empire, one of the largest in Europe and one that seemed to be reflective of his massive frame (he was seven feet tall) and his great zest for power. Unfortunately for

the Byzantines, accepting military help from the Ottomans led inevitably to the Turkish settlement of the Gallipoli Peninsula. In 1354 Orhan's son, Suleyman Pasha, occupied the city of Callipolis after an earthquake crumbled its defensive walls. This was the first Turkish conquest in the Balkans and so served as their bridgehead into mainland Europe. Eventually they were forced out (in 1366), but by this point the Ottomans already occupied Adrianople as well as part of Bulgaria and much of Greece. Their planted horsetail flags sent an unmistakable message: the Turks were there to stay and they intended to expand. Their victory on the Maritza River (1371) and their capture of Niss and Sofia caused the Serbians to have to pay a yearly tribute. Czar Alexander of Bulgaria avoided this by committing his sister to the sultan's harem.

The Turkish presence in the Balkans had three crucial historic developments: the outbreak of the Black Death, the creation of weapons ignited by gun powder, and Ottoman expansion north and west of the Danube River. The latter triggered opposition from the free Balkan nations; the Byzantines remained neutral. In 1389 in Kosovo, the combined armies of Albanians, Bosnians, and Serbians

received assistance from the semi-Roman population of Wallachia and from the Magyars of Hungary, who, like their kinsmen the Ottoman Turks, had won by force a settlement in Europe; but who unlike the Turks, adopted the creed and the civilization of European Christendom and became for ages its chivalrous defenders. Slavonic Poland also sent aid to her sister Slavonic kingdom of the South...The great kingdoms of western Christendom heard with indifference the sufferings and the perils, to which its eastern portions were exposed by the new Mahometan power.¹¹

In the end, it was a military coalition of twelve thousand men from Eastern Europe who valiantly fought the powerful army of twenty-seven thousand of Sultan Murat I (r. 1362–1389). He scored a major victory against Christian forces. During this conflict a Serbian nobleman, who was taken prisoner and pretended to beg for his life, jumped up from kneeling and stabbed the benevolent sultan to death. The heroics did not save King Lazar of Serbia, a prisoner of war, from execution. All three of them died in the same tent. The son of the sultan, Bayazid, instantly became the new ruler of the Ottomans and, in a pre-emptive action, executed his other brother who had also fought at Kosovo. The province was now renamed the Field of Blackbirds. When part of kingdom of Serbia succumbed to these Ottoman onslaughts, the new Despot Lazarevich gifted his sister, the daughter of Lazar, to the new sultan. Like any other minor rulers who continue to hold power, he pledged unconditional loyalty to the Porte, and truly honored his commitment. He was first tested during the Ottoman invasion of Wallachia when Lazarevich's army of

eight thousand supplemented the expeditionary force of forty thousand that had fought a Wallachian army at Rovine in 1395. It had severely crippled Bayezid's army. Despite his dubious success in engagements north of the Danube, Sultan Bayezid (r. 1389–1402) settled territorial matters with Bosnia to his advantage and took control of Greece. In his view, the Byzantine Empire was identical to the City of Constantinople, where he established a Turkish merchants' quarter.

Since Bayezid was threatened by the many royal intrigues and clandestine contacts which Emperor Manuel II maintained with western powers, the ambitious sultan conducted the longest ever siege of Constantinople—from 1394 to 1401. He began by building the fortress of Anadolu Hisar on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus. This Turkish military base across the narrow passageway from their city frightened the Constantinopolitans into requesting a new crusade from the Christian world. Their cry for help and the threat of ongoing Ottoman expansion convinced the rest of Europe to respond. Western contingents of British, French, and Germans lined up with Bulgars, Hungarians, Polish, and Wallachians to form an international contingent some fifteen thousand strong. They faced slightly more numerous Turkish and Serbian armies which had proved victorious in 1396 at Nicopolis on the southern bank of the Danube. This confrontation ended with the unnecessary and tragic death or capture of the overconfident French and German knights. Most of the captives were massacred in front of the sultan while he was drinking wine; a few were kept alive to be paraded throughout the streets of the empire and released for substantial ransom. This was a lesson to the rest of the world not to challenge Bayezid, whose epithet was "Thunderbolt."

The only positive outcome of this conflict was that Bayezid was forced to remove his army from Constantinople. Once again, the great city was temporarily saved because an Ottoman war was taking place elsewhere. However, the siege of Constantinople later resumed, and the arrogant Bayezid demanded that a mosque be built there and that he receive an annual tribute of ten thousand gold ducats. Additionally, he decreed that the imperial crown had to be surrendered to him, or all of its citizens would be put to death when the city was conquered. Emperor Manuel refused these demands and was forced to leave the city and look for help from as far away as England. The sultan was now in control of the Balkans; he moved the Turkish capital to Adrianople, renamed Edirne. For all practical purposes, Constantinople had been cut off by the Turks from the rest of the Balkan Peninsula. Predicatably, its days were numbered.

However, in 1400 it once again escaped a brutal fate because of a distant happening. In remote Central Asia the formidable Timur Lenk (r. 1370–1405), also known as the "Earth Shaker," drew on the remnants of the Golden Horde

and the discontented Turkish tribes who had been subjugated by the Ottomans, to build a military machine that was unsurpassable. Under his invincible leadership, the battle-hardened hordes clashed with the Ottoman army on July 20, 1402. Bayezid was captured at Angora (Ankara), and his empire almost destroyed. The once haughty and merciless sultan was carried inside a cage and forced to kneel in front of his captor. Having been given a taste of his own medicine, he would die of a broken heart. This ironic twist of history ensured the survival of the Lilliputian Byzantine Empire (now reduced to three patches of land around Constantinople, the Thessaloniki region, and the tip of Peloponnesus) for the next half century. Nevertheless, Constantinople remained unconquered and the undisputable capital of Orthodoxy.

The able and diplomatically gifted Manuel II (who, in his younger years, had spent time as a hostage at the court of Bayezid) became involved in the civil war among Bayezid's sons. This consumed all of the military energy of the Ottoman Empire, which had descended into a state of chaos. Still, Constantinople was safe, and the Byzantine Empire seemed to have regained its power and prestige, especially after the advantageous treaty of Gallipoli in 1403. There, Suleiman (the oldest son of Bayezid) agreed to return Thessaloniki and many other Greek possessions to the empire, and cancel the tribute which, since 1379, had accumulated to 345,000 ducats to be paid by Constantinople to the Turks in a lump sum. This was a huge accomplishment for the Byzantines, but an outrage for the other sons of Bayezid. They now engaged in fratricidal wars over the right to rule the divided Ottoman Empire. Once again Manuel rose to the occasion by disciplining the ambitious Musa who tried to pull rank on him. The emperor endorsed his brother Mehmed, who defeated Issa, the brother who united with the fourth, Sulyman, and invaded Anatolia. Musa killed Sulyman, who had offered in vain all the Turkish provinces in the Balkans in exchange for the emperor's support. Musa then tried to besiege Constantinople, but was killed by his own Janissaries. The cautious runner up, Mehmed, blinded another brother who was not even a contender to the throne, and Manuel wisely endorsed Mehmed, considering him to be a more reliable peacemaker than the others. The new sultan called Manuel his "father and overlord," and by ratifying the treaty of Gallipoli, provided an enormous reversal of power over the early years when Manuel had been the vassal of Bayezid.

Mehmed I (1413–1421) carried out successful campaigns in Asia Minor and re-united the Ottoman Empire by using his strength and clear thinking. Because of his integrity, his willingness to forgive, his love of the arts, and his good taste in architecture, he was given the epithet "The Gentleman." Before he died at age forty-seven, he entrusted his two young sons to Emperor Manuel, aware that the third older one, Murad, would kill them to secure his

throne. However, another royal pretender, Mustafa (or possibly an impersonator), who went missing in action in the Battle of Angora, appeared to make a bid for the royal title. He was a strong contender who bitterly fought to claim his rights in the Balkans. He was defeated by Murad and executed by his own troops because of doubts about his royal credentials.

In spite of Manuel's wish, Murad II (r. 1421–1451) ascended to the throne and quickly sought revenge by besieging Constantinople. Once more, Manuel attempted to create a distraction by helping another Mustafa (Murad's younger brother) to become a sultan. The Turkish army subsequently suspended its siege of Constantinople to go to Bursa where they defeated the newly installed thirteen year-old ruler. He was captured and a group of officers hanged him. Suddenly the emperor was faced with a serious political problem: Sultan Murad forced a new treaty on Manuel and required him to pay a new annual tribute of one hundred thousand *hyperpyra*. Health problems forced the physically disabled Manuel II to relinquish most of his official duties to his son John, who immediately seized the throne. Strapped for financial resources, the father and son sold Thessaloniki (the second city of the empire) to Venice. History revealed this to have been a very shrewd deal since it was conquered by Murad in 1430.

John VIII (r. 1425–1448) followed in his father's diplomatic footsteps when he visited Pope Eugene IV and tried to create an anti-Ottoman coalition. He succeeded in having the union of the Orthodox and Catholic churches ratified in 1439. A master of public relations, he traveled to Florence with an entourage of seven hundred to demonstrate his imperial power. The priesthood of Constantinople resented this union, and it proved to be a decision that later would cost the stubborn Byzantines their empire. On the brighter side, the Western diplomatic bluff worked on Murad who maintained his distance from Constantinople and diligently extended his rule into Serbia. Then he turned his attention to the unruly Balkans in an effort to settle his territorial claims north of the Danube. After Murad II's army failed to conquer Belgrade, it invaded Transylvania in 1442, where it again failed to conquer the fortress of Sibiu (Hermannstadt). The city was saved in time by John Hunyadi who had already won in Serbia against the Ottomans. The Christian general continued his string of victories at Niss, Sofia, and Snaim, in an attempt to reverse the Turkish ambition to dominate Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Herzegovina, Serbia, and Wallachia. The latter two countries served as the negotiating point for a ten-year peace that ensured their independence from Ottoman vassalage.

The sultan's defeat in the Battle of Jalowaz left him with a diminished and exhausted army unwilling to face the "White Knight," as Hunyadi was referred to in recognition of his glorious victories. Murad II decided to abdicate and next in line for the throne and the sword of Islam was his twelve

year-old son, Mehmed II, born in Edirne of a Christian mother from Hum/Herzegovina. As it turned out, the youngster, who was catapulted into this most important position, was not up to the imperial task, so Murad remained in power. He scored a brilliant victory in Varna in 1444 against a Christian coalition of Albanians, Hungarians, Germans, Poles, Serbs, and Wallachians. These stormy events resulted in a second crushing Ottoman victory at Kosovo in 1448 against the power-hungry Hungarians. Three years later Murad II died in Edirne. Mehmed II, now a teenager, was ready to succeed him. He demonstrated a limitless determination to be the next Alexander the Great and Caesar—to score victory upon victory on all the battlefields and to raise the empire to its zenith.

By 1450, the Byzantine Empire had lost so much land and revenue that its economic and military power were nominal. Constantinople seemed to be sustained by Orthodoxy which ruled the spiritual life of most of the Balkan nations and Eastern Europe. What really kept the great metropolis in one piece, however, was its impregnable Theodosian Wall. It had been repaired in 1434 and was one of the defensive land lines that protected the triangle shaped city. It successfully held off sieges carried out by Arabs, Avars, Bulgars, Persians, Russians, Turks, and others over the course of approximately one thousand years. Up to this point in the history of the empire, only internal treachery and turmoil could cause its gates to open and allow the enemy inside. Its massive, towering walls were otherwise able to withstand just about any punishment conceived by any aggressor. But, now, the past era was gone. Militaries had new methods for gaining victory: walls were rammed or attacked from mobile towers with stones and incendiary devices catapulted over them, or troops penetrated them from tunnels. These methods would be replaced by the cannon; thus far it had been of marginal use in battle, but it was destined to markedly change the way wars were conducted. Certainly Mehmed II studied and understood the value of artillery and portable firearms as these had been successfully used in the battles at Varna and Kosovo.

Since he was determined to conquer Constantinople, the sultan decided to create a large military base for supplies and shelter for troops. One already existed on the Anatolian shore—the former Anadolu Hisar (Anatolian Castle) had been converted into the fort of Guzelce Hisar. In 1452 Mehmed built a sister fortress, Rumeli Hisar (Roman Fortress). Constructed over a period of only four months on the European shore, it was instantly termed “the Throat Cutter.” It had cannons on its fortified walls which were capable of destroying any enemy ship or contingent of troops incoming between the 660-meter (less than a half mile) wide shores of the Bosphorus. This unmistakable military action indicated the sultan’s intentions to besiege Constantinople.

Emperor Constantine XI (r. 1449–1453) in turn planned every conceivable political maneuver to save the city and prevent the empire from finally its final collapse. Proclaiming that the days of the Antichrist have come, he issued a plea for military help to all whom he believed would positively respond, from Pope Nicholas to Hunyadi and Alfonso of Aragon, to the Venetians, the Genoese, and the people of Dubrovnik. But kingdoms of western Christendom did not respond to the desperate pleas, even though their eastern borders were dangerously exposed to encroaching new Mahometan power. To westerners, the problem was a strategic and economic one: with the Throat Cutter blocking the entrance to the Bosphorus, they all depended on the sultan's permission to move their ships and cargo from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea. When, at one point, a Venetian ship defied warnings to stop, it was sunk by a volley of cannon fire from the new fortress, and its crew was impaled—a lesson to future trespassers. Given these ominous signs, seven Cretan and Venetian ships carrying hundreds of would be defenders from the Latin districts of the city and departed from Constantinople.

Yet another problem developed when Constantine tried to reconcile the differences between his own Orthodox Church and the Church of Rome as part of an attempt to attract the help of the Catholic world. As expected, the effort intended to save the once glorious city

... alienated his own subjects from him, and the bigoted priests of Byzantium, when called on by the Emperor to contribute their treasures and to arm in the defense of their national independence, replied by reviling him as a heretic. The lay leader of the Orthodox Greeks, the Grand Duke Notaras, openly avowed that he would rather see the turban of the sultan than the tiara of the pope in Constantinople. Only six thousand Greeks, out of a population of one hundred thousand, took any part in the defense of the city; and the Emperor was obliged to leave even these under the command of the factious Nataras, whose ecclesiastical zeal showed itself in violent dissensions instead of cordial military co-operation with the chiefs of the Latin auxiliaries.¹²

Sadly, the emperor could not even count on his own people to defend their city. In fact he could not rely on his own brothers, both despots of Morea (Peloponnese Peninsula of the Greek heartland). They fought bitterly against each other until they both became Ottoman vassals. In desperation, Constantine tried to duplicate the diplomatic tactics of his father, Manuel. He blackmailed Mehmed with another contender for the throne, Prince Orhan, a grandson of Sultan Bayezid, who now resided in Constantinople. His impudence, however, backfired and this uncalled for action was met with outrage from Vizier Halil, a top adviser to Mehmed:

You stupid Greeks, I have had enough of your devious ways. The last sultan was a lenient and conscientious friend to you. The present sultan is not of the same mind...You are fools to think you can frighten us with your fantasies... If you want to proclaim Orhan as sultan in Thrace go ahead. If you want to bring the Hungarians across the Danube, let them come... All that you will achieve is to lose what little you still have.¹³

The lenient sultan mentioned here was Murad II. He had approved Constantine's coronation in 1449, and when he died, he was still on friendly terms with the emperor. But his son, Mehmed, was of a different mind. He had the Throat Cutter Byzantines from a nearby village massacred when they opposed his soldiers' acts of pillage. Constantine sent an imperial envoy to Mehmed with a message. He announced that, if the sultan continued to bring in troops and demonstrate hostility toward the empire, he would have to close the gates of Constantinople. Mehmed executed the envoy and sent back a brief but non-negotiable message, "Either surrender the city or stand ready to do battle."¹⁴ Both rulers stood their ground and were committed to war.

As previously mentioned, for Mehmed the key to military success was the cannon—a weapon that was not produced by the Turks. Luckily, the best cannon maker was Orban, a Wallachian expert from Brasov city who specialized in smelting and casting cannons of different sizes. His opportunism caused him to sell his expertise to the highest bidder, the Turks. His sample cannons, built at the foundry in Edirne, easily passed the firing tests and were immediately transported to Constantinople, 225 kilometers/140 miles away. The sultan was pleased and ordered the largest bronze cannon ever to be built. It measured twenty-seven feet long and had a barrel diameter of thirty inches; it was capable of firing a half-ton stone projectile over more than a mile. This royal gun was respectfully named "Basilica" and, pulled by sixty oxen, it arrived on the perimeter of Constantinople within six weeks. Its maker, not even a field artillerist, arrived there as well. Many other smaller super-cannons produced at the Orban's foundry were also brought in. Some seventy of them were divided into fifteen batteries of different calibers. They were able to shoot stone projectiles weighing 200–400 kilograms/400–800 pounds. Most were positioned to face the Saint Romanus Gate located in the middle of the city wall. The Basilica was placed in front of the royal tent guarded by Janissaries, so it could be seen by the sultan and everyone else. Each cannon was dug in and protected by a parapet with a shelter for artillerists and munitions. This was the first occasion in recorded warfare in which entrenched artillery contributed to a siege.

While Mehmed prepared meticulously for the war that would change the history of Europe, the Constantinopolitans continued to believe that some heavenly power would eliminate the immediate danger. Indeed, they hated

their pro-western emperor who was doing everything possible to save them. The fighting spirit that had created their empire had vanished by now as had the time when the

primitive Romans would have drawn their swords in the resolution of death or conquest. The primitive Christians might have embraced each other and awaited in patience and charity the stroke of martyrdom. But the Greeks of Constantinople were animated only by the spirit of religion, and that spirit was productive only of animosity and discord.¹⁵

It was under these circumstances, that Mehmed arrived in Constantinople on April 6, 1453. There he inspected his two hundred thousand troops and assessed their positions for attacking the twelve miles of Constantinople's walls. The walls were defended by only eight thousand soldiers under the command of Emperor Constantine XI. A heavy iron chain lay across the entrance to the Golden Horn which harbored twenty-six ships and so prevented a Turkish naval attack along the northeast wall. Some one hundred fifty small Turkish war galleys built at the shipyards of Gallipoli arrived on April 12 to oppose the much larger ships sailing under Byzantine, Genoa, and Venice flags. This was also the day when cannons opened fire on the 6.5 kilometer/4 mile Theodosian Wall that protected the city. For six days a non-stop assault consisting of cannon fire and traditional catapults pummeled the area of the Saint Romanus Gate. Then the wall and towers began to crumble. The damage that was incurred during the day was repaired at night with surprising efficiency by the city's defenders. The Basilica delivered a fifteen hundred pound deafening shot seven times a day, producing the anticipated damage to the wall and terrifying the city's population. But with each volley, the cracks in the super cannon's cast multiplied and became enlarged. Too much loaded gunpower caused the explosions inside the bronze barrel to exceed the metal's power of resistance. Orban kept bracing the damaged barrel with iron hoops before each shot and asked permission to recast it before it split open. But the furious Mehmed denied his request, and the inevitable happened—on April 15 the eighteen ton gun fired and the barrel exploded, killing everyone in its proximity including its maker, Orban (so legend has it).

Still, more than one hundred cannon shots were fired each day at the same spot on the wall until the breach was so large that the nightly repairs could not handle it. On April 18 Mehmed ordered an all out assault on the city. It was bravely carried out by his troops, but equally bravely repelled for over four hours by the city's forces who had placed themselves on the outer wall. The defenders used their artillery, handguns, Greek fire (a kind of flame throwing device), rains of arrows, spears, stones, hot water or oil, and even the dead bodies of enemies to halt the attackers from climbing the ladders under

their shields. When the intruders made it as far as the parapets, hand-to-hand combat with swords and daggers, axes and maces, or even deadly wrestling matches, took place. The defenders, who were continually reinforced by the reserve detachment of one thousand men, clearly had the advantage. The Latin auxiliaries, formed from small groups of Aragonese, Catalans, and Genoese soldiers sent by friendly cities, proved to be excellent fighters. In fact their leader, John Giustiniani, was appointed by the emperor commander-in-chief of the defense. The besiegers claimed to have killed eighteen thousand enemy troops, but they retreated in good order. As usual, after each fight the Constantinopolitans headed to the churches to thank God for their victory.

God seemed to be pleased because four Genoese and one Greek transport ship fought their way into the city's harbor, thereby renewing the hopes of the ammunition-deprived and under-nourished defenders. To his dismay, Mehmed witnessed how the slow moving Christian sailing ships crushed and sank each of the fast Turkish vessels that tried to halt them. The sultan, who stood on the shore and then rode his horse into the waves and shouted orders, could not believe how badly his fleet (which was powered by rowers) had performed. Along the city's walls, the cheerful Constantinopolitans saw the five tall ships majestically cruising over the lowered chain into the safety of the Golden Horn. The unlucky Turkish admiral faced punishment by impalement, but instead received one hundred lashes delivered by Mehmed himself using his cudgel.

In spite of all of these salutary efforts, a military rescue from outside remained an illusory hope—one that would never materialize for Constantinople. The Venetians alone were willing to send a fleet to join the fight, but first they had to be paid by the pope for the naval help they had provided in 1444 in conjunction with the Varna Crusade. But there were also persistent rumors that an Italian and a Hungarian army were on the way to Constantinople. These led Mehmed to offer peace in exchange for seventy thousand gold ducats. The city's residents also had to convert to Islam. When his proposal was rejected, the sultan ordered his sailors to bypass the heavy chain between Galata and Acropolis Point and carry their warships overland into the waters of the Golden Horn. The fleet of seventy small galleys were to rolled on wooden logs by the *Christea Turris* (Tower of Christ) of the Genoese fortress that allowed the transport. While inside Constantinople, seven hundred Genoese fought under their commander Giustiniani.

This tactical maneuver was executed on Sunday, April 22, when of many of the city's defenders were attending mass or enjoying a day of rest: any sort of attack was expected on the opposite side of the city, where the Turkish cannons had opened a deceptive cannonade. In a single day, each warship was pulled a quarter of a mile on dry land by oxen and oarsmen until it reached

the waters behind the chain that secured the city's other shoreline. This entire water-land-water operation was successfully carried out under the astonished eyes of the city's residents. They were intimidated by a second cannonade that encompassed the entire pharaonic task: the boat movers were urged forward by the roar of drums, shouts of encouragement, and the crack of whips. By nightfall, the Turkish navy controlled both shores of the Straits of the Bosphorus and so both the eastern and western sides of Constantinople. The city was deprived of a safe harbor, and supplies were prevented from being ferried across from Galata, the Genoese citadel. The encirclement of Constantinople was complete and deadly.

The presence of the Turkish fleet in the bay of the Golden Horn forced Constantine to move precious troops and cannons from the Theodosian Wall to a second defensive area. The survival of the city's defenders depended on the elimination of this new front. During night of April 28, Genoese and Venetian tallships, followed by smaller and faster ones armed with the Greek fire, attacked the Turkish ships, all of which measured less than one hundred feet and powered by oarsmen. Both fleets had anticipated an easy victory and both were disappointed. The battle degenerated into a furious series of cannonades from both sides, complicated by handgun and sword attacks among the sailors of the rammed ships. It ended with Byzantine prisoners being impaled by the Turks on the shore and Turkish prisoners being butchered along the city walls, all in full view of each other. Regardless of the outcome, the reduced Turkish fleet was still left to cruise the Golden Horn, and the crescent flag waved in dangerous proximity to the city walls.

The first massive artillery duel took place on May 3, and, for the next ten days, Byzantine and Turkish cannons fired at each other across the massive walls and Golden Horn. Four days later the Romanus Gate was attacked by successive waves of regular troops and Janissaries, but the defenders held on in spite of hunger, lack of sleep, and losses. Cannon coverage allowed the Turkish engineers to build a pontoon bridge across the Golden Horn and mercenary Saxon miners from Serbia dug tunnels under the wall, albeit with no gains for the besiegers. All seemed to go well for the Greek defenders and their few international allies until the last week of May when there was a partial eclipse of the moon (which left a crescent shape). This was followed by an incident in which the Virgin Mary's icon was dropped during a church service; also, violent rainstorms pummeled the city and the sky over Hagia Sophia glowed with prolonged lightening bolts. All of these chilling revelations were taken by Constantinopolitans to presage their doom, and by the Turks to indicate their coming victory.

Mehmed rejoiced with confidence, but worried about the hot summer days when his camps would be transformed into an infested, open sewer. He

renewed his offer to the Byzantines that they should surrender in exchange for certain conditions. It would save the city from the three-day ritualistic plunder (something the sultan never wanted to happen) and there would be an annual tribute of one hundred thousand bezants (gold coins) to conclude the pact. But Constantine once again refused this offer. His decision was an agonized one. He was faced with an impossible task, but still believed that some military power from the East or West would come to rescue the city of Christianity.

As if there was not enough bad news for the emperor, a small Venetian ship made its way into the city harbor and announced that no Venetian fleet was on the way. Peering out from the high wall by night, the defenders saw a sea of lights on the horizon and believed that a Hungarian army was approaching to aid them. In fact, it was the Turks marching toward the city for a final assault on it. Seeking refuge in churches, the residents sang chants of *Alleluia* in Latin and *Kyrie Eleison* in Greek, and similar choirs prayed all across the city for salvation. During moments of silence, they were able to hear the roaring sound of the drums from the Turkish camp and the calls for prayer to Allah. A thousand years of the city's defensive triumph were at stake in these moments and its fate depended only on the condition of its massive walls.

On May 28, Hagia Sophia was packed with nobility and military leaders listening to the Greek mass. They were interrupted at midnight by the news of the final Turkish assault on the city. Emperor Constantine, who had already received the Holy Sacrament, rushed to the breached wall where Giustiniani and his Latin fighters showed their savage tenacity in defense and bravely held their fighting positions. As was customary on such occasions, the bells of the city's churches began to toll unceasingly, imploring God for victory or at least protection. The successive waves of attack began with the bashibazouks (sacrificial troops) and then with Anatolians storming the moat and outer walls, arriving eventually at the battered Blachernae Gate that led to the imperial palace. It was through this same gate that the crusaders had invaded the city in 1204. Simultaneous with this assault on the city, the Turkish flotilla from the Golden Horn launched an attack on the eastern side. The defenders had to split their forces; still, they proved victorious, even against the third wave of Janissaries who assaulted the inner wall.

Unfortunately the commander of the Genoese contingent, the best armed and armored of the all units, was mortally wounded and his men carried Giuseppianni to their ships where they lay anchored in the Golden Horn. Their departure left Emperor Constantine and his Greek soldiers alone to battle an increased number of attackers. Worse yet, the tearful retreat of the Latins conveyed the message of a lost fight and induced a vast wave of panic in the population. As had often been the case in similar battles, a small gate of

Kerkoporta (leading to the royal palace) was found by the Turks to have been left unlocked. They rushed in and planted a few of their flags on the wall's crenels.

Chaos erupted among the weary defenders when they saw their emperor throwing off his purple mantle to engage in a hand-to-hand combat. However, victory was a mathematical impossibility for the Byzantines, as their numbers were insufficient. The few hundred of their remaining fighters were unable to prevent the Turkish army from entering the eight main gates of the city or to maintain control of its ninety-six towers. In no time at all, the city was flooded with Ottoman warriors eager to enrich themselves at its expense. Constantine heroically vanished without a trace in the heat of the street battles. He was forty-nine years old. His protégé Prince Orhan, dressed as a Greek, tried to escape the slaughter, only to be recognized. He committed suicide by jumping off the wall, and his head was presented to the laughing Mehmed.

As the battle died down, the invaders took over Constantinople. The siege had lasted fifty-three days. In its entire history of 2,138 years, the city had been besieged twenty-eight times and captured only eight times. It had reached the end of its legendary existence. The Byzantine Empire was no more.

The three days of looting promised to the victorious soldiers turned into an orgy of systematical plunder, rape, and the massacre of both soldiers and civilians. Even the Turkish sailors joined the pillage, inadvertently giving the surviving defenders a rare opportunity to escape by the sea, particularly the non-Greeks who sailed away from the Golden Horn in their ships. But Mehmed did not wish to rule a ghost city and so decided to save the churches and other landmarks. He could not do anything about the symbol of Orthodoxy, the majestic Hagia Sophia which was packed with horrified civilians. Its five inch doors were broken opened, and fighters of Allah savagely punished the "enemies of the Faith," also called "infidels," while the priests were still at the altar chanting their prayers for mercy. Most of the women and children were instantly enslaved and dragged to various collection points for ransom evaluation in the once "God-protected city." As the streets became streams of blood, religious artifacts were brutally stripped away. Many of them were made of gold and silver and studded with precious gems. What they could not take, the intruders destroyed. In their search for hidden treasure, they smashed the tomb of Enrico Dandolo, the Venetian Dodge who, two hundred fifty years earlier, had allowed his crusaders to similarly desecrate the Hagia Sophia. When they found only his bones, the soldiers threw them to the dogs on the streets. Thus an act of justice that was long past due took place under images of the wide-eyed saints painted on the walls. The entire city became a

scene of indescribable horror. Mehmed was aware of his soldiers' barbarism and after one day ordered all looting to stop. He then sent his troops back outside the walls of the city which he did not want destroyed.

When the sultan, a historian and art connoisseur in his own right, entered the Holy Wisdom Church (a building that was of a size that no medieval mind could comprehend and whose domed architecture seemed to reach into the sky), he bowed in front of the biblical figures on the walls and prayed from the pulpit. From the main dome above, the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus were lit by windows as if the angels illumined them with spotlights. They appeared to witness the historic scene in a way that made the twenty-one year-old monarch shiver under the weight of his responsibility: after 1,123 years and 27 days, Hagia Sophia ceased to be a Christian church. Walking the dilapidated streets, now emptied of their last fifty thousand inhabitants, Mehmed reviewed the monumental buildings, statues, and other imperial symbols and saw Constantinople as his future capital. On June 2, the magnificent cathedral now renamed Aya Sofya Mosque, held the first Islamic service. Soon, wooden minarets would frame its huge contours. The sultan never touched the Phanar quarter, the commercial center of Orthodoxy and Byzantium. It was soon to become "the Mecca" of any and all important dealings within the Ottoman Empire. It was the powerful marketplace in which everything, including future positions of leadership in the Balkan nations, was sold to the highest bidder. It produced the famous Phanariotism that drove the development of the Balkan nations from then on.

After 1,100 years, the empire that had made and destroyed other empires, countries, kingdoms, and nations had been replaced with another—one that had nothing to do with the city's European heritage, but was strongly anchored in three continents. Finally, Mehmed had achieved his ultimate dream: a Roman Empire was now literally at his feet. A commemorative coin was minted with the inscription *Islambol* (full of Islam).¹⁶ Thus the momentous year of 1453 marked the beginning of a new Islamic era in the history of Europe

Although the Ottoman Empire was totally unknown three hundred years prior to this conquest, it took fewer than ten sultans for it to become a world power and gain control over almost the entire Balkan Peninsula. Thus, in addition to the Hellenic, Macedonian, Roman, Byzantine civilizations, and many Slavic layers of paganism, and in addition to the cultural influence of Orthodoxy, a final layer of Islamic culture was added to the Balkan history. This ancient land persisted by simply accruing new influences as time went on. Not unlike a dying parent who leaves behind both biological and adopted children, the Byzantine Empire left a multi-ethnic family to a foster parent

who spoke a different language and prayed to a different god. This new Turkish foster parent was despised and feared by all Christian nations for its brutality and corruption. Although it was initially perceived as a strong master, it would come to be referred to as a “sick man of Europe.” It slowly died at various levels, all the while spreading the seeds of a complicated life in which only bribery and sheer terror (of men or saints) brought an unwilling respect for a brutal social order. Needless to say, this legacy found fertile ground in Eastern Europe, sowing its seeds into an already competitive and corruptive cultural and historic process. The result was what has come to be known as Balkanization.

NOTES

1. Warren Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium* (New York: Palgrave/St. Martins, 2001), 236.
2. Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 89.
3. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 1015.
4. Treadgold, *Concise History*, 236.
5. Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 458.
6. Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 314–315.
7. Choniates, *O City*, 350.
8. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1127.
9. The family dynasty of the Osmons continued uninterrupted until 1923 when the Turkish Republic was proclaimed and the entire family expelled. The last sultan’s grandson, His Imperial Highness Prince Ertugrul Osman, immigrated to the United States where he lived in New York City until September 23, 2009. He died there at the age of 97, leaving no survivors. Fred A. Bernstein, “Ertugrul Osman, Link to Ottoman Dynasty, Dies at 97,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2009, B16.
10. Treadgold, *Concise History*, 236.
11. Edward S. Creasy, *History of the Ottoman Turks* (Beirut: Khayats, 1961), 27.
12. Creasy, *History of Ottoman Turks*, 78.
13. Roger Crowley, *1453: The Holy War for Constantinople and the Clash of Islam and the West* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), 55.
14. Crowley, *1453: Holy War*, 60.
15. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1205.
16. The new capital, Istanbul (pronounced “Istanbolin” by the Greeks and “Stamboul” in English), served as the Turkish capital until 1923 when it was relocated to Ankara in Anatolia. Today, the city, in which vestiges of Byzantine and Ottoman history speak for its glorious centuries, is a main touristic attraction. It is still the epicenter of the process of

Balkanization. Most of its houses are built without permits, polluting the medieval image of the city. The famous Phanar district has now been overtaken by Anatolian immigrants who have no interest in preserving its past, or enhancing its future. The misappropriation of international funds for maintaining the city's unique architectural landmarks (including the famous walls whose cheap repairs crumbled in 1999 earthquake while the old structure held on) defies the rules of concerned organizations, yet the city remains vibrant. It is reflective of life in both the modern and the old worlds, as evidenced by the immense variety of colorful and tasteful goods to be found in its famous Grand Bazaar founded in 1461 by Sultan Mehmed II. As for present day Turks, they take pride in reviving "Ottomania" which reminds them of the glorious legacy of the Ottoman Empire that ended in 1922 after a long string of lost wars.

Epilogue

In the early twenty-first century, a modern nation is expected to be free of internal ethnic conflicts. A society that aims at political correctness must embrace a multi-cultural community of different religions, races, skin colors, and origins; all of these need to be held together by common ideals. But one thousand years ago there was no concept of “nation,” only fanatical attachment to the same heritage and language, and, most of all, commonly held patches of land. Today, Eastern European cultures retain the same basic values they developed in the Middle Ages, regardless of what the western world considers moral and right. In the Balkans, the loss of one’s ethnic identity is considered worse than dying, and clan dominance over a territory is still the main force that unites ethnic groups. This phenomenon is the product of ongoing wars in which both the victors and the victims are always ready to participate—another cycle of retribution, one that will probably again redefine borders and displace ethnic groups residing in other countries. This is the main root of the Balkanization process. The term actually means the continual division and re-division of a land and its homogenous individuals, where the people keep their identity and refuse to accept the presence of different ethnic groups within their territory. For more than fifteen hundred years, no victorious nation would enjoy peace in Eastern Europe because of its unhappy and belligerent neighbors who had an unquenchable thirst for bloody revenge and were determined to repeatedly re-draw the map to their advantage.

The passage of time has only intensified the process of Balkanization. In the last two centuries it reached new peaks with the ethnic territorial disputes of the Crimean War in the 1850s, the Russo-Turkish War of the 1870s, and the Balkan wars of 1912–1913. Why did Great Britain side with the Ottomans instead of with the Serbians when they declared war on Turkey in 1876? Because the Russians supported Serbia, and the British did not want Moscow

to dominate the Balkans, which had traditionally been ruled by other superpowers. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was one example of the subjugation of many discontented ethnic groups, and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo revealed the relentless desire of the Slav nationalists to create a separate Greater Serbia. As is well known, this incident ignited World War I (1914–1918): Europe went up in flames and more than fifty million people died. If that were not enough, the revolutionary ideas of Marx (who despised the Russians) took root not in western proletarian countries as he had predicted, but in Russia where serfdom still prevailed and people still lived in the Dark Ages. The Balkanization in Russia provided fertile ground for the development of Communist ideals—mainly, for the poor to plunder the rich. World War II (1939–1945) began with Hitler’s inflammatory idea of destroying Communism and furthering German colonization of Eastern Europe and Russia. It ended with the Red Army’s invasion of Europe, a spectacle of barbarism not vastly different from that which Asian invaders inflicted on the Byzantine Empire.

Backed up by Soviet bayonets, Marxist doctrine was brought to bear on societies and their economies throughout Eastern Europe. It required that feudal people who had never experienced the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, or the Industrial Revolution build an ideal and equalitarian society. Stalin, Tito, and other dictators understood how to exploit the mentality of Balkanization and ensure Communist domination there for three generations. Applying the principle of “divide and conquer,” followed by that of “subjugate and rule,” both tyrants forced countless millions of people from various ethnic groups to “relocate” and co-exist with different populations. The new political order preached brotherhood, yet there was an ongoing and official policy of genocide: more than five hundred thousand nationalists in the relatively small country of Yugoslavia, and more than ten million people in the Soviet Union paid the price for this proletarian experiment. Tito and Dimitrov of Bulgaria planned to build a Pan-Slavic state south of the Danube so as to separate Balkan Slavs from others; Stalin discovered the plot, at which point Dimitrov died in Moscow and Tito broke away from the Communist bloc.

In other words, Communist dictatorship was merely an extension of the form of rule that prevailed in the Dark Ages: brutal political leaders would go to any extent, including conducting inquisition-type trials, to hold onto absolute power and eliminate opposition. Regrettably, Orthodoxy continued to preach “the bowed head avoids the striking sword” and prayed in public for the good health and long life of the Communist leaders, just as it had done in the past when it made people kneel in front of any authority. In exchange for this, godless political chieftains promoted the zealous clergy to ever higher church positions. An impressive number of priests became informers to ad-

vance their careers, and countless numbers of people who trusted their pastors with confessions ended up in interrogation rooms and died at the hands of torturers or in prison. The Communist dictatorship of Eastern Europe essentially exploited the medieval theocracy and duplicated the terror of the czars of the Middle Ages. The old meaning of the term “Balkanization” resurfaced and was applied draconically in Soviet occupied nations.

To their credit, the Catholic Czechs, East Germans, Hungarians, and Poles refused to be dominated by the “Orthodoxy” of Moscow. They would not allow themselves to be swallowed up politically by this eastern land they never wanted to belong to, and revolted against Communism. Ironically, it was the process of Balkanization that proved to have a boomerang effect when the same mentality toppled Leninist societies in the late 1980s. However, their unfortunate next step was to import a form of democracy which they could not relate to, along with Americanism wrongly interpreted. While the contact with Western culture created euphoria at all levels, instinctively the Balkanians clung more than ever to their heritage and to the habits which had helped them survive the constant turmoil that marked their convoluted history.

The newly acquired and misused freedoms of the post-Communist era did not dissolve the inherited differences among nations; to the contrary, they renewed medieval disputes and thus proved that tribal division was alive and well in spite of the influence of globalization. In no time at all, the dismemberment of the former Communist states triggered ethnic conflicts in the Eastern bloc. When they were territorially challenged, the Orthodox Serbs tried to maintain their regional dominance and resorted to force to settle centuries-old blood feuds with their neighbors. Their aim was to expel all non-Serbs from their territories. The ethnic civil war that ensued resulted in the deaths of approximately one hundred thousand Bosnians (mostly Muslims), as well as thousands of Albanians and Croats. Millions of refugees ran for safety, but there was none to be found. Hundreds of mosques were destroyed or damaged, and some three hundred Catholic churches and monasteries were closed by the Serbs. They, in turn, suffered massive human and material damage as a result of NATO bombings.

An enforced peace, supervised by international troops and undergirded by economic measures, only intensified Serbia’s sense of humiliation. When Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, the United States Embassy in Belgrade, surrounded by one hundred fifty thousand violent protestors, went up in flames; even a McDonald’s restaurant (considered a symbol of Americanism) was ransacked. Serbians could not understand how Americans who were fighting the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and Iraq could support the Muslims in the Balkans. When Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. visited Sarajevo in May 2009, he was fully aware of the area’s hate-filled past and spoke out against “the sharp and dangerous rise in nationalistic rhetoric”

that followed “old patterns and ancient animosities.”¹ Evidently, now that American troops have fought in the Middle East, Washington has begun to understand the dangers of Balkanization. Still, a full grasp of its roots remain elusive to many western experts and leaders.

The superpowers may have settled the ethnic dispute in Cyprus between the Greeks and Turks, or in Kosovo between Albanians and Serbs, but the Greeks will never give up the hope of taking back Istanbul and forcing the Turks out of the Balkan Peninsula. Nor will they admit that Alexander the Great was Macedonian; for that matter, they object to the name of the Republic of Macedonia, for they consider it to be the name of their own territory as it existed during Byzantine times. In the same spirit, it is unlikely that the Serbians will ever recover from the loss of their iconic Kosovo to the Albanians and from the humiliating bombings of NATO.

Nevertheless, in Eastern Europe the Russians still occupy the German seaport of Königsberg which is surrounded by the now free countries of Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland. The Russians also snatched a segment of Romanian land (some four hundred miles away from Russia) and formed the Pridnestrovia Moldavian Republic with Tiraspol as its capital. Certainly they have no thoughts of handing over the Crimean Peninsula to the Ukrainians or to the Muslim Tartars; the Tartars were once deported by Stalin and subsequently returned to claim their properties, properties that are now owned by Russians. Nor are the Ukrainians willing to give up their occupation of the Romanian territory of Buceac/Budjak which belongs to the Republic of Moldova. In fact, all the minorities of Ukraine want to be independent, as do the millions of Ukrainians who currently live in Poland. In the meantime, in a rustic 180-year old tavern in Obrezje, Slovenia, a “36-year-old owner painted a fluorescent-yellow line across the floor to delineate the very spot next to a pool table, where the border between Slovenia and Croatia bisects the property.” Patrons can “eat roast pork dinners in Slovenia, step a few yards across the room to Croatia to use the bathroom, saunter back to Slovenia to pay the bill and end their meal on Croatian soil over a game of billiards and a shot of local pear brandy.” As the owner concluded, “In the Balkans, ‘every little piece of land counts’”²—a centuries-old motto in the Balkans.

However, an issue which is even more complicated than that of ownership is the right of minorities to their use of their own language regardless of where they live. A case in point is the small Republic of Slovakia. It has approved the right to education in Czech, German, Hungarian, Polish, and Ukrainian (Ruthenian), and to this list Bulgarian, Croatian, and Romany (most known as Gypsy) are to be added. Tiny Albania is the most densely populated country of the region and has more than ten minorities, each of which speaks a different language, all of which have dialects and sub-dialects. Needless to say, this reflects the mix of populations that has defined its past. For more than forty

years, the Russian language, imposed by Kremlin dictators, remained the *lingua franca* of all the former Soviet republics. They are now free to teach their own language in schools, This does not alleviate their heavy dependence on the natural resources of Russia. It is therefore next to impossible to mitigate against the omnipresence of the Russian language. Moreover, it has obvious benefits, among them its “soul healing” swear words.

But the peoples of the Balkans are not alone in their tendency to cling to medieval, clannish values. The 9/11 terrorist attack on the western world was carried out by tribal powers that were unwilling to accept the ways of life modeled by America. On a larger scale, the Afghan and Iraq civil wars, the never-ending Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the genocides throughout Africa demonstrate that primitive and aggressive thinking about right and wrong has not by any means receded from human consciousness.

Certainly, it is very hard to move everyone onto the same page when they have different points of view concerning peace and prosperity. A telling example is the way the European Community decided in 1993 to create a European economic market and absorb part of Eastern Europe into its sphere of influence. Doing this required that certain borders be eliminated and ethnic tensions be brought to an end—efforts that had a history of failure in the Balkans. At the time of this writing, Western Europe continues to overlook many patterns of political and economic behavior that have their roots in the history of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

At the core of continental political thought idea is that a European Union will eventually be able to offer the eastern nations an opportunity to be integrated into the life of the Western cultures. This hope was built on the assumption that each nation’s troubled past would be healed by a new prosperous economy and a political future focused on the common good. After all, Greece was the cradle of western civilization and the Hellenic culture still fascinates the world; also, the Russians produced some of the world’s best writers. The overwhelming enthusiasm and the public display of joy that marked the fall of Communism was sufficient reason to justify the revival of nations that had long been oppressed. Little attention was paid to the phenomenon of Balkanization, with its seismic mosaic of people who had never experienced the capitalist system and had no concept of a democratic constitution. What the well intended but politically naive western leaders expected was that, as long as money was pumped into the region, all would go well. No one seemed to remember that the Byzantines also subsidized the barbarians in an effort to keep the peace, but no gratitude followed. To the contrary, since the Middle Ages any governmental donor became a hated enemy when his generosity did not increase, when it was halted altogether or ceased, or, worse yet, when payback time arrived. Now, centuries later, an ambitious European

Union is trying to teach new ethics and financial discipline to people who retain these centuries-old habits and worldviews.

Regardless of the lessons that history provides, nations which are accepted into the European Union are entitled to share in the more prosperous markets of the West, and their citizens can travel there without visas. Yet, curiously, it took very little time for the “happy” integration that was brought about in the name of cooperation to evolve into an enormous confrontation between the East and West. This time it was not caused by a Church schism, nor was it the result of a Cold War; instead, the trouble came about because the former “gray countries” that had been elevated into the “Eurozone” persisted in holding their hands out for benefits and stubbornly remained fiscally unreliable. And, on top of this, their sudden integration into the economic sphere of Central Europe has resulted in non-welcomed mass migration to the western countries.

These new immigrants, uprooted from their lands even if now by choice, live a dual life; they are physically present in their new country, but mentally they are still back home. This causes them to resist assimilation and display habits which, from the Western point of view, are uncivilized: sleazy opportunism and cheating, disregard for personal and public hygiene, drinking oneself into a coma, public rudeness, etc. Their self-esteem is based on the fact that they look down on others, they take pleasure in the misfortune of others, and, to them, co-existence means “let me have what you have.” Such habits are not confined to the working class, but are also offensively displayed by the nouveau riche, who live sumptuously and almost inevitably in bad taste. All these people are stamped with the term “Balkanization,” a term that has now come to mean that they look and act in ways that are diametrically opposed to Western standards and generate instability.

The true meaning of Balkanization was soon discovered by the eager western industrialists and businesses who ventured into Eastern Europe. Lured by the prospect of cheap labor (the average monthly salary in many of these nations is only a few hundred euros), optimistic speculators entered what they believed to be a second China boom. However, in short time they found themselves facing the staggering reality of rampant corruption from the top down, i.e., from the actual leaders who were groomed in the Communist era all the way to the lower levels of society. The consequence of this prolonged mismanagement and these mafia-like activities was that the hundreds of billions of euros invested in Eastern European economies from the 1990s onward produced little or no profit: they only created a new nomenclature—a “kleptocracy,” the new super-rich strata and high officials above the law. After investors built or modernized factories and helped the local population with charity missions, they were confronted with argumentative workers who only felt exploited and demanded salary increases. When they surmised that

a business was becoming prosperous, they want a larger share of the profit, while internal theft increased and production decreased. The Balkan work ethic, “promise everything, get the money, and deliver nothing” that had bankrupted the Communist system, surfaced once again, now in full display. After a great deal of puzzlement and fruitless analysis of such situations, investors realized they were risking the loss of established clientele. Their buyers had noticed a decline in the quality of their products and the ruined investors took their businesses back home. Once again, the Byzantine, Russian, and Turkish legacy of bribery and corruption as an indispensable part of the “work ethic” was reinforced with the Balkan practices of “bite the hand that feeds you” and “kill the golden goose.”

Such unproductive conditions resulted in massive unemployment and created hardships that pressed the younger generation to migrate across the open European borders. In doing so, they brought with them the effects of Balkanization. Their labor may be cheap, but it is often tainted by a faulty sense of duty and lucrative trickery, all aimed at making fast money by trying to get something for nothing, exaggerating any truth, making any wrongdoing someone else’s fault, and a passion for revenge. Since they are unable to get or to hold a job, many migrants live parasitically on society, engaging in unlawful activities, and become public nuisances. When they are caught, they scream “discrimination.” This is not to say that westerners do not practice deceitful behaviors; some individuals certainly have similar traits, but as a whole Western culture does not encourage this sort of thing. Moreover, it deliberately discourages breaking the law. All in all, instead of contributing something to the elevation of the lifestyle of Eastern European peoples, the West is finding itself dealing with the reality of the everlasting historic process of Balkanization. Any critical document, including satirical plays, written about it two hundred years ago is still valid for eastern society today.

The westward migration of Eastern Europeans began after World War II, when in the west multi-culturalism was a sign of political sophistication and social progress. Today, a second and third generation of Turks, former guest workers, has become “Germanized,” as is demonstrated by the Little Istanbul that flourish in each major German city. Similarly, London is sometimes wryly called Londonistan after its Pakistani population, and Dublin, with its numerous Polish migrants, could be nicknamed Dublinski. France, Italy, and Spain also have taken in millions of new settlers, including migrants from the Balkans, and in many Swedish schools native children are in the minority. These migrations continue, each bringing with it Islamism and traditions from distant lands rooted in complex histories.

Oddly enough, the present migration has produced a labor vacuum in Eastern Europe, so these countries have attracted poorer immigrants from

China, Mongolia, Vietnam, and other Asian countries, all of whom are in search of a better life. A revived process of Mongolization was carried out by droves of Asians, not riding horses to spread terror as during the age of Attila and the Golden Horde, but arriving by planes in search of profitable jobs. These industrious workers played a productive role during the economic boom, and the new settlers enrolled their children in local schools, aiming to follow the examples of Algerians and Turks in Central Europe. However, hundreds of thousands of Asians also found themselves living in a parallel world, exploited and unwanted by their host nations. During the economic crisis beginning with the year 2008, the non-integrated Asian migrants were unemployed, homeless, riddled with debt, and subject to depression; often they were offered a one-way plane tickets back home. To such prospectors the much acclaimed process of globalization had turned into a doomed nomadism, and this within the continent of Balzac, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Wagner.

While they are certainly not responsible for the global recession of 2009, the Eastern European nations, now heavily in debt as a result of excessive use of credit, are quick to blame their problems on foreign capitalists who close banks and businesses in their neighborhoods. Having exhausted the initial financial means by which the new upper class enriched itself, the Communist based governments that had, in the meantime, sold all of their national assets once again appealed for help; it promptly came in the form of financial rescue plans, emergency funds, reconstruction and development loans, and rescue packages from the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and other lending institutions. But, as usual, those needy nations most riddled by colossal debt considered these trillions of euros merely another gift in disguise. If they had to be accountable for repayment, Russia could always bail them out in exchange for their entering into an anti-western alliance. It had been done before. And this would once again demonstrate that Western capitalism does not work, nor does its democracy, otherwise a political schema which Eastern countries neither understand nor value. What is undeniable is that Kremlin continues to replace the Phanar.

In retrospect, using Balkanization has always been a safe way for Eastern Europeans to find viable solutions to problems posed by their present reality. After Vice President Biden visited Ukraine and Georgia in July 2009, he realized the threat posed by Moscow in the region. He commented on the troubled Russian economy, one which is based on a corruption-ridden banking system and inept judicial system: "The reality is the Russians...have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years, they're in a situation where the world

is changing before them and they're clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable."³ With this statement, he confirmed what many observers of Eastern Europe and Balkan history have long been aware of—that the same economic and political conditions persist there today as five hundred years ago: laws are not subject to enforcement, everything is negotiable and relative, and everyone interprets rules to their own advantage. And, again, this entire, chaotic and inherited system is often portrayed by the people of the Balkans as a *talmesh-balmesh*, a dish whose contents cannot be described.

In sum, no kings, emperors, or political regimes, such as Communism or Nazism, have been able to change the old habits of the Phanariotism, Turkocracy, and Russism: unjust social promotion, epidemic corruption to sustain financial and political power, fixed elections, and a cherished but brutal sense of patriotism. A conveniently selective memory with regard to history and eagerness to please an unbeatable adversary cause mercurial shifts in political affairs. Politeness is rare and artificial; wheedling, cursing, and gossiping have long remained a favorite entertainment; any promise is subject to change if there is some advantage in it; shrewdness prevails over sound judgment; and there is virtually no interest in knowing how all of this might be viewed by the rest of the world. These behavior patterns have survived the ravages of time and created a unique—and uniquely troubled—social system based on mistrust. Ironically, the ultimate influence in these countries is still Russia, which can cut the gas and oil supplies in a flash—and not the western world, which asks them to think and act differently than they have heretofore. In fact, a large portion of the financial aid given to the Eastern European countries ends up in Russia as payment for supplies.

Communism was murderous, but dictatorship brought order to the Balkan societies. In fact, many people look back ruefully on the time when everyone was taken care of by the state. The East Germans, too, were forced to adopt the policies of Balkanization and, in the post-Cold War era, they have faced the same problems with social and economic integration into the West. A time period and set of conditions that brought democracy and a new set of economic opportunities has turned into a quagmire of problems no one can handle or solve. Prosperity meant either inflicting poverty on others or borrowing money that could not be repaid. The influx of western capital and the importation of its culture challenged tens of millions of people to live differently and become something they had no interest in being.

Despite the laudable efforts on the part of the advanced nations, the obscure and backward eastern nations will continue to play the role of victim and to jump at any opportunity to prove the superpowers wrong. The relationship between rich and poor nations has only superficially improved: "Globalization, it turns out, has only intensified, not diminished cultural differences

among nations. The forces of nationalism love to exploit culture because it's symbolic, economically potent and couches identity politics in a legal context that tends to pit David against Goliath."⁴ Above all, aggressive nationalism remains unchanged among hostile Balkan neighbors, and tribal rules supersede international law.

The process of Balkanization has, however, also preserved precious fruits in the form of some truly splendid human traits. The most common and most appreciated habit is that of hospitality—a host displays his or her best nature and always tries to pleasantly impress a guest. Western tourists are often moved by the genuine welcome, compassion, and readiness to help displayed by people throughout Eastern Europe. These attitudes and behaviors point to a good inner core in otherwise tortured souls and to a sincere desire to be acknowledged and praised. Above all, the people of the Balkans display an enviable physical and mental endurance when it comes to pain and deprivation. Their unadulterated belief in the possibility of a better life for their loved ones makes them willing to be tremendously self-sacrificing. The belief in “God will give and God will take” is supreme and a mark of their obedient nature. And, the tribal-like environment they create gives them great comfort and strength.

Certain taboos and family values are fiercely enforced in these cultures, as are a set of rules which are valued only locally. Patriarchal societies (men still dance with men) keep women in an inferior position, even though they are the real achievers and leaders in the family. The honor of an unmarried woman or a widow is always firmly defended by her family. Family clans take precedence over any other social organization. Overall, tribal life has remained strong and offers many therapeutic benefits, including abundant and genuine collective support. Children are a common good and protected by everyone, and the elderly are venerated and well cared for. Since people are deeply religious, they rigorously observe all traditional rituals and holidays; deceased family members are honored and mourned for a long time with memorial feasts and offerings. But spirituality also leads them to believe in dreams, omens, and other superstitions and these can trigger irrational decisions or sudden mood swings.

Balkanians tend to laugh at everything, humorous or morbid, and they often use philosophical jokes that reflect their real thinking about the surrounding world. Their ethnic jokes mirror their prejudices and true opinions about other people, but their sense of irony and humor amounts to a form of therapy, one that is too often absent from life in the West. However, the person who laughs at everything usually ends up to being the object of laughter—the joker often becomes the joke.

Lastly, to identify the true Balkan mentality one need only to listen to the way people of different ethnicities curse. Their imaginative curses are directed

at everyone and everything, from God to the devil, personal relatives, friends and foes, the dead and alive, sacred holidays, objects, animals, and food. Cursing and joking are more than a national sport; together with wailing, they are a way of venting frustration and healing grievances, letting negativity out one's system. Heavy drinking is considered a proud challenge for strong men and also believed to cure mental and physical problems, and it is a must when it comes to socializing. Medieval thinking is reflected in all aspects of life: an obese person is regarded as healthy and prosperous, an obviously prized status during years of famine, pellagra, and other starvation-related epidemics.

Eastern Europeans tend to be both witty and wise when it comes to practical matters and their ability to survive. Proud to a fault, fighters display incredibly stamina and bravery for the sake of heroics; they are savage when victorious and woefully angry in defeat. Given that they have so little hope for the future, they eulogize the good old days, even though there were no better ones in the past. The history of each small and otherwise obscure nation is recounted in a glamorous light. Folk heroes' faults are dismissed as they are heralded for the inflated achievements that led to their canonization. As a rule, national pride involves showing contempt to others whose history seems to be of no account unless it supports a flattering point of view or justifies a valued event. And, again, their painful past and unpredictable future makes these people difficult to trust. They cannot give up their bickering, set aside grievances, or get beyond their collective illusions. Their rich fantasy life creates a land of make-believe with a pathologic sense of humor and a perverted feeling of optimism, all of which are based on the received wisdom that "the less truth is known, the better it is for everyone."

Centuries of civilization have wrought little change in Eastern Europe, and now the ambitious European Union is trying to teach the peoples of the Balkans to stop turning back the clock and begin enjoy a better present and future. But this is not easy. Inherited traditions are stronger than any outside influence and the Balkanized nations will probably continue to lag behind the rest of Europe politically and economically regardless of any progress they claim to make. To them, "a kick in the butt means a step forward," but that is not the way success comes about. Their ongoing desire to craftily cheat each other and collectively cheat any system, while oligarchs dictate the governments, can only make the national prosperity a distant dream.

Can Westerners succeed in changing such old mentalities? Or they will follow the Byzantines, Russians, and Turks by merely adding new layers to the historic process of Balkanization? Most of answers are provided by the legacy of Byzantine intrigue. One fact is not like to change: the hegemony of the European Union will attract an increased number of Eastern European immigrants to the developed countries. In the Roman and Byzantine empires, this pattern resulted

in the end of economic power and brought down whole civilizations. Over time, it will become clear whether the broom of history erases present differences or if the inherited roots of Balkanization will be grafted onto those of Western culture under the patronage of global brotherhood. It remains to be seen if the melting pot of the Balkans will once again boil over into a social and political disaster that is reminiscent of past history.

Certainly, the Russian President Dimitri A. Medvedev is fully aware of needed changes, among others, to eliminate the judicial corruption he calls “legal nihilism,” the Soviet era attitudes regarding work efficiency and national arrogance about being a superpower. On November 12, 2009, he delivered a speech from the Kremlin in which he called for “today’s generation of the Russian people...to make our contribution to lift up Russia to a new, higher stage in the development of our civilization.” He pointed out, “We have to acknowledge that in past years we didn’t do enough ourselves to resolve the problems we inherited.” Nevertheless, he concluded, “The strengthening of democracy does not mean the weakening of law and order. Any attempts to shatter the situation, destabilize the government and split society under demographic slogans will be prevented.”⁵ Similar moralistic and well intended manifestos have been delivered by each president and prime minister of each Eastern European nation since the fall of Communism, all of them ending up powerless and ultimately corrupted by the thriving Balkanization system and kleptoc patriotism. As an example, by 2010 the Greek government had amassed an international debt of 270 billion euros. The government’s fiscal irresponsibility was caused by rampant tax evasion, epidemic corruption, and a lack of budgetary discipline that could have put Greece in bankruptcy. While the nation looked for rescue from the European Union, it blamed the West for high interest rates applied to the loans.

In any case, it is important to remember that the people of the Balkans have many strengths, and they are far from being either the worst or the best inhabitants of this planet: they are who they are.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Kulish, “Biden Warns Bosnians Against ‘Ancient Animisities,’” *New York Times*, May 20, 2009.
2. Dan Bileksky, “In Border Feud, Slovenia Now Has Croatia Behind the 8–Ball,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2009.
3. Peter Spiegel, “Biden on Eastern Europe,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2009.
4. Michael Kimmelman, “When Ancient Artifacts Become Political Pawns,” *New York Times*, October 24, 2009.
5. Clifford J. Levy, “Russian President Calls for Nation to Modernize,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2009.

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