RANDALL BAKER

SUMMER IN THE BALKANS

laughter and tears after Communism

KUMARIAN PRESS

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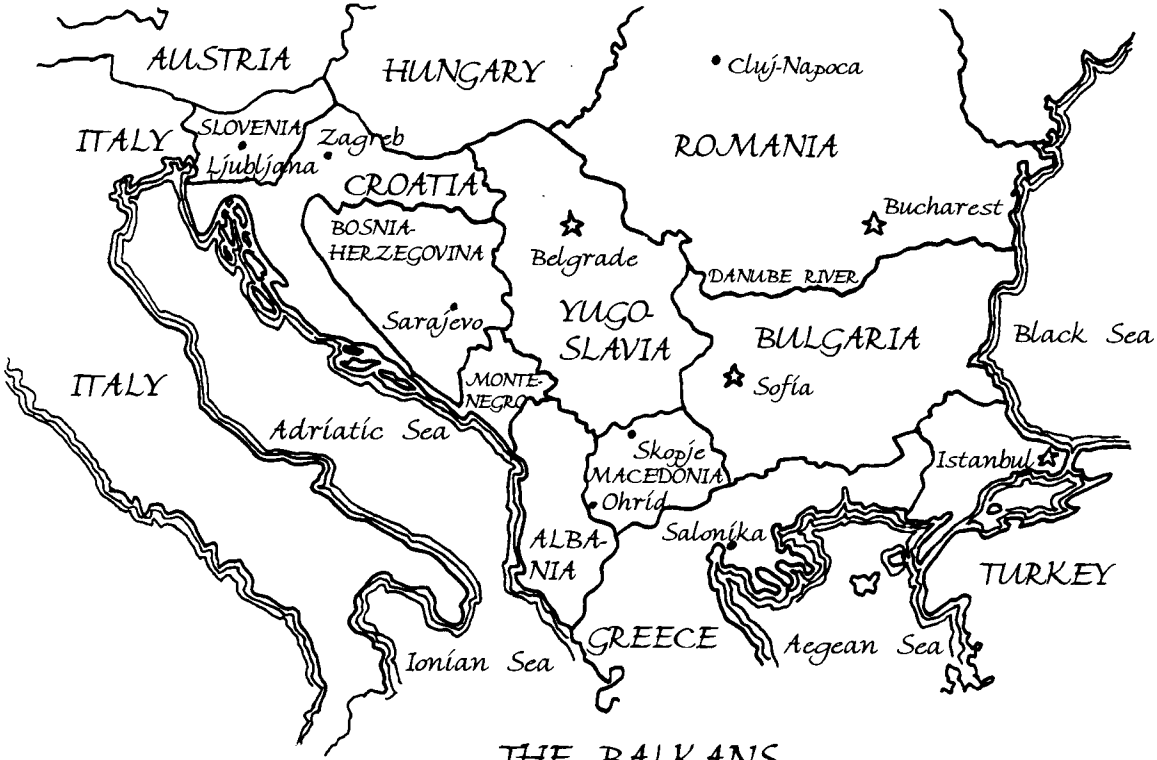
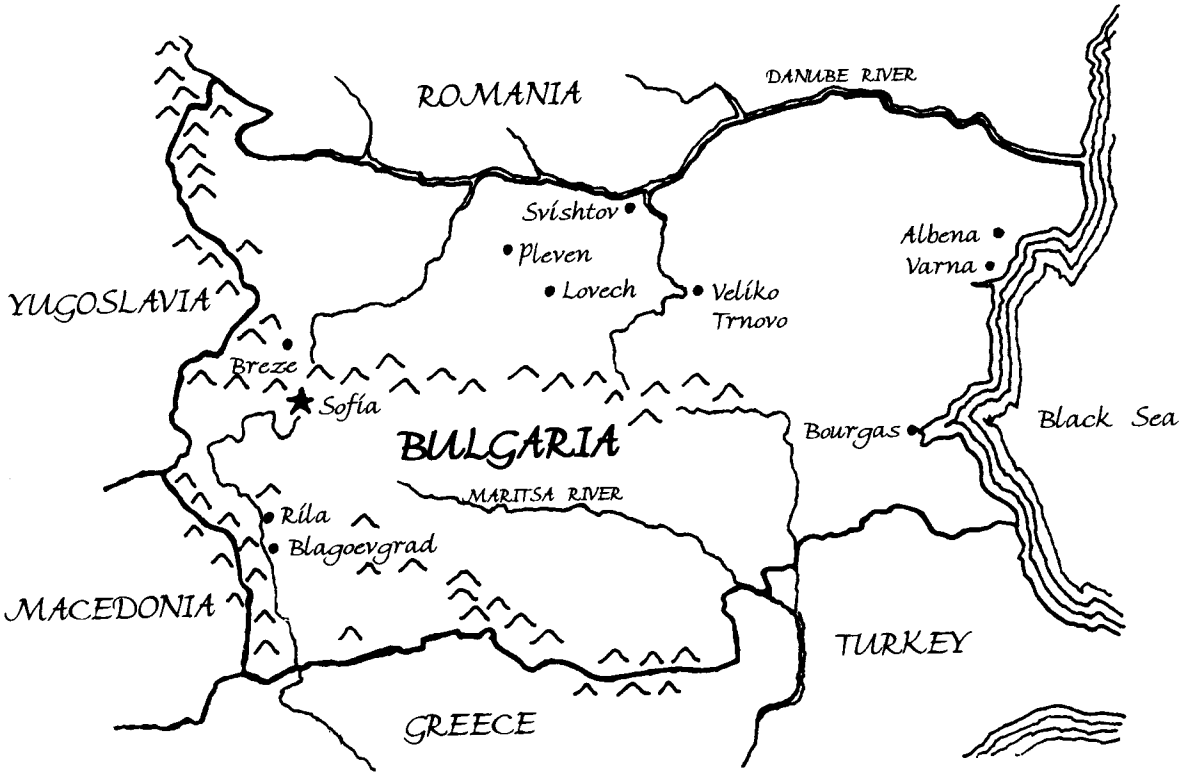


THE BALKANS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Prologue

Wandering the streets of Bath in the deepening darkness, I find myself on a handsome old English stone bridge staring into the water. I am musing on the absence of aged things in Bloomington, Indiana—my new home in my new country—and the absence of historical continuity that someone from the Old World feels when he settles in the new one. By my side is a vivacious, irrepressibly enthusiastic woman with a crown of glorious red hair. I remember her speech from the afternoon session of the conference we were attending but cannot recall her country of origin. "This reminds me of the lovely old Turkish bridges," she remarks in a completely unattributable accent.

"Unfortunately," I reply, "I have never been to Turkey, though, having written a book about the Turks and the Arabs, I have always wanted to go there. Then I could see—"

"Oh, I am not from Turkey," she says animatedly, stepping backward. "No, I am from Bulgaria."

If you play word-association games you may want to try the word "Bulgaria." For most people, including me at the time, no image springs to mind: no mountains, palaces, gardens, faces. Nothing. The journal *Foreign Affairs* described it as the "ultimate

unknown place." However, it was not to remain unknown to me, although at that moment, I had no indication of what consequences would flow from that late-night exchange.

Since childhood I have been fascinated by remote and what I used to arrogantly consider "exotic" cultures, countries, and corners of the world. I have finally matured to the point where I can appreciate that nothing is quite so bizarre as an American wedding or the behavior of fans at a British soccer match. When I was a high school student, my bedroom was filled with portraits of world leaders, international flags, and other multicultural paraphernalia. I wrote furiously to contacts all over the world and gathered heaps of material, to the everlasting dismay of my mother, who abdicated responsibility for my corner of the house in the late 1950s.

After completing my university degree in geography and the natural sciences in Wales in 1965, I used a Rockefeller award to pursue African studies at Makerere University in Uganda. The next five years defined my life, culminating when I received a doctorate from the hands of Field Marshal Idi Amin Dada[1] with the words, "well done, my boy." In subsequent years, I spent long periods in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Fiji, among other places, while employed by the School of Development Studies, which I had helped create at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. None of this equipped me to claim expertise in the field of Eastern Europe. Even now I wonder how I had the cheek to imagine that I could do anything for the Bulgarians or anyone else in that volatile piece of geography known as the Balkans.

What I could offer the Bulgarians was my experience of living and working abroad and seeing my ideas take shape on the anvils of many cultures. As Francis Bacon observed, the test of scholarship (now largely displaced by expertise) is the ability to pose the right questions, and I hope that is my skill. I gained experience by helping develop and build new institutions in England, Sudan, and Bolivia, among other countries. My field, by some strange accident of experience rather than formal learning, is public administration. That is the subject I teach at Indiana University.

Emilia, the woman on the bridge, explained that she was part

of a group that had just established a university in Bulgaria, appropriately called the New Bulgarian University (NBU). They aimed to break free of the ideological curriculum and the politically appointed time-servers among the faculties of that country's established institutions. The NBU, she told me, would teach "new things in new ways" to Bulgarians thirsty for new perspectives and skills. She also told me that she was a lawyer and a professor with an abiding interest in reforming the public service. The field of public administration is not academically developed in Western Europe, and that is why she favored the "American model," she said. "Why not come and help us?" she asked, touching my nerve of curiosity about the unknown.

A vigorous correspondence followed, and I decided to seek a grant to build a link between Indiana University and the NBU. In 1991 I made two visits that enabled me to put together a strong proposal for a three-year partnership with the people I came to know in Sofia. Unfortunately, the U.S. government had other plans for Bulgaria, and we failed to get the money. By this time, however, I was so afire with respect for these people and what they were trying to do, so outraged by the years of miserable intellectual dishonesty that they had had to endure, that I became a missionary for their cause. The Fulbright Commission made my mission a reality by granting me a Fulbright scholarship, for which I will be everlastingly grateful. It provided my wife, Susan, and me with three of the most challenging and memorable months of our lives. I trust that the Bulgarians got something out of it too.

Out of the experience came a 200-page diary. I am not a diarist, but I needed to capture the impressions, emotions, excitements, and frustrations as they piled atop one another. I have, therefore, preserved the diary format for most of this book. Although such a structure has both good points and bad, above all it allows the reader to share the immediacy of life under the conditions of democracy's difficult birth.

By the end of the summer, I had collected a kaleidoscope of incidents and impressions. As I read and reread these entries, I began to recognize certain dominant recurring themes. There are five main elements that bind and give structure to this text.

The first, and to my mind most important, is *the everyday experience of building democracy* (or, where did all the food go?). The Chinese are reputed to have a curse that says, "may all your dreams come true." The West spent so long wishing democracy upon the good people of Eastern Europe that it gave no attention to just how this would be achieved in a nuts-and-bolts way. Constitutions come and go, parties form and fade like the morning mist, but what does it all mean for those who have lived through, with, and in the culture of shadows that was the Communist monolith? How easily do attitudes and institutions change? "Transition to democracy" is a fine phrase, but to the man or woman in the street in Sofia, Skopje, or Ljubljana, what does it really mean? To many, it looks like the end of civilization as they knew it, for now they see the rise of organized crime, the evaporating value of their money, the lack of control or leadership: "Is this transition or is this anarchy?" they may justifiably ask. By reading this book, you will get to know some of these people well and gain some feeling for their dilemma. Unless we can put names and faces to these problems, we will not easily share them. Humor is also important here, for in humor is truth most readily revealed.

Distinctions between countries is another important element of this book. In reading the entries from the various countries we visited, I realized how very different each country is, even though we tend to lump them together as the "Balkans." Although the finished work is mostly about Bulgaria, it also features visits to Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia. These trips may be trivial in time and depth, but they demonstrate the startling contrasts between one place and another: from shiny new Slovenia, where everything works and it is hard to imagine that this place was ever in socialist Eastern Europe, to Croatia, with its war fever and ancient hatreds; from run-down but charming Bulgaria, filled with both surging enthusiasm and black despair about the future, to Macedonia, which could so easily and terrifyingly become Bosnia II. In the Balkans these places may be, but their differences are defining and endlessly fascinating.

A third inescapable element running through the following pages is *the baggage of history*. The Balkans is a part of the world

where people ceaselessly ruminate on and become angry about things that happened hundreds of years ago. Furthermore, the history of the Balkan countries was often a malleable commodity reshaped by the despots who held the reins at any given moment. Added to this are the wild swings that history takes in this part of the world, trashing all that went before: Fascists, Communists, local tyrants—all have had their need to eradicate history and reshape it. These periodic intellectual purges can be monstrously destructive for those who must live through them. People survive by creating parallel existences and living, as it were, outside history in some limbo of semiotics. This was, and to some extent still is, a culture of shadows. The danger now is that the historical baggage, good *and* bad, will be dumped. It may seem that sometimes I have nothing good to say about the previous regime, but within that structure, good people lived and worked. One of the founders of the NBU, psychologist Toma Tomov, wrote of this casting aside of generations:

> There is a group of influential people belonging to the reformist factions within what was formerly called the Communist Party. These people display: open-mindedness, a feeling of personal responsibility, a strong position within the Communist Party, and high professional and social standing, attained by virtue of competence, dedicated work, and impeccable morale. Their names are not in the headlines and, I believe, never will be. They were quietly working to precipitate an open crisis but prevent bloodshed, long before awareness of dissident thinking. Now that the balance is tilted, however, these people are faced with the pressing demand to step down from the political scene and into oblivion, the stated reason being their undeniable link with the previous regime.[2]

I have tried to focus on *people*. To my mind, this is realism: People do what they must to survive or thrive.

A far more mundane but nonetheless interesting part of these reminiscences is *how two souls from the Midwest survived in such*

convoluted circumstances. So many things work beneath the surface that it may seem perilous to come open-faced and unsophisticated from the comfortable insularity of Indiana into this byzantine environment. Survival skills are a major element of this book, for they demonstrate how much time is spent simply meeting the challenge of living from day to day.

Last but definitely not least, since it was the ostensible reason behind my visit, *how does one go about building a program in government and public administration that will serve democracy?* Every country has its own political and administrative culture, and like old wine, it does not travel well. How am I supposed to tell the Bulgarians what to do when I don't have the first idea of the nature of their government, administration, policies, and so on? How can I be of value? Many "experts" simply sell that with which they are personally familiar and comfortable, which may be why so much international aid is dangerous and wasteful. Following Bacon's advice, the best I could do was to work with people to identify the questions, avoid the mindless transfer of "models," and act as a sounding board.

As most of the book is about Bulgaria, a brief history is in order. The Republic of Bulgaria, with a declining population of around 9 million, is tucked away in a far corner of Europe surrounded by ancient enemies or endemically unstable places. It is a country of gentle topography: no geologic dramas. That is not to say that it is flat, for it is not, but there is a reassuring quietness to the mountain chains. It has its share of gorges and escarpments, but somehow one always feels comfortable with them rather than overawed or intimidated.

The country is a border domain and forms, or formed, a frontier between East and West, Christianity and Islam, European and Asian empires, Slav and non-Slav peoples, and, for a time, the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Bulgaria considers itself the cradle of the Slav language group, though the original Bulgars were a Turkic-speaking people who invaded the lands of the local Slavs and later became

assimilated into one nation by the tenth century. The evolution of the nascent Bulgar state was put on ice by the arrival of the Ottoman Turks in 1396. For the next 500 years, the Bulgarians managed to remain Bulgarian in subtle and circuitous ways within the creaking eastern edifice of the Ottoman state. The Bulgarians rejoined the Slav orbit in 1878 when Tsar Alexander II of Russia, the "Liberator of Bulgaria," declared war on Turkey and passed through Bulgaria on his way to seize Constantinople. Although the tsar was denied his final victories over the Ottomans, his armies decisively destroyed the Turkish forces in Bulgaria at the battle of Pleven, despite warnings from the Great Powers to desist. The Bulgarians had risen bravely, if hastily, against the Turks in 1876 in a valiant and colorful guerrilla campaign that the Turks had crushed mercilessly. Now the martyrs were justified in a massive victory. After the Russian intervention, it looked as though Bulgaria would expand mightily west and south. But the Great Powers, considering Bulgaria to be a surrogate for Russia, intervened again to prevent an upset in the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean that would threaten routes through the new and sensitive Suez Canal. Bulgaria shrank almost to its present geographical boundaries.

For a while, the new country existed in two parts: a northern principality of Bulgaria, and a southern part known as Eastern Roumelia, which owed various degrees of supposed allegiance to the Turkish sultan. The Bulgarians selected a German prince to rule their new principality. Germany was then a supermarket of available monarchs and princelings, and the Bulgarians' first choice was a Battenberg (related to the family of the present Duke of Edinburgh and the late Louis Mountbatten[3]). But Prince Alexander abdicated after he ran into trouble for his liberal ideas. He was replaced by another German prince, Ferdinand, who was a direct relative of the last king of France, Louis Philippe. In 1908, "Foxy" Ferdinand, the wily Bulgarian prince, threw off the Turkish yoke (to use the standard Bulgarian expression) and declared himself tsar of a united Bulgaria.

For the remainder of its history, Bulgaria may best be described as having chosen its friends badly. In the first Balkan war (1912),

Bulgaria expanded mightily into Thrace and Macedonia at the expense of Turkey. In the next season's war (1913), Bulgaria found its erstwhile allies opposing it, and the country shrank once again, losing most of its recently acquired territory. By 1914, a much bigger and better war was available, and Bulgaria plunged in on the losing side. As a result, it lost even more territory, including all the Aegean coastline. In the interwar period, Bulgaria was a military dictatorship that was eventually replaced by a royal dictatorship under Ferdinand's son Boris in 1935. Ferdinand himself abdicated after the debacle of World War I.

Wars went out of fashion for a while, and then in 1939, a seemingly unstoppable Nazi force swept all before it. True to form, Bulgaria jumped in on the German side in order to recover Macedonia. The Nazis won some Bulgarian sympathy by getting their new allies in Romania to cede part of their southern territory, the Dobrudja, to Bulgaria. The German attack on Yugoslavia and Greece allowed Bulgaria to regain territories in Macedonia, Thrace, and Serbia. The Bulgarians, however, refused to assist their German allies in invading the USSR, which they regarded as their traditional friend and ally. Once again, Bulgaria lost most of its newly secured territory and acquired, instead, the Soviets on a permanent basis. The Soviets allowed Bulgaria to keep some of the territory that Romania had been forced to cede by the Nazis. A plebiscite in 1946 abolished the monarchy and exiled the royal family.

During the Soviet period, Bulgaria was among the most compliant of all the USSR's allies. This is interesting, because Bulgaria is not geographically contiguous with the former USSR, and Yugoslavia used a similar accident of geography to take a more self-sufficient stance against Moscow. It was left to Romania under the extraordinary Ceauşescu regime, however, to take an independent stand—and Romania most definitely shares a boundary with the former USSR. Bulgaria's relationship with the USSR can be explained by the fact that it was ignored by the Allies after the war; the West was more concerned about preserving Greece. Furthermore, it was the Russians who had liberated Bulgaria from

the Ottomans, so there was a sound historical reason for the Bulgarians to be friendly to the great Slav power to the north.

When the Bulgarian Communists came to power under Georgi Dimitrov in 1947, the USSR gained its staunchest ally. In 1950, Victor Chervenkov, who became first secretary after the death of Dimitrov, introduced a plan to tie Bulgaria industrially to the USSR and sever economic links with the West. In 1954, Chervenkov was removed under the reforms of Khrushchev, and Todor Zhivkov replaced him. For most of the next thirty-five years, Bulgaria was ruled by this man until his downfall in 1989. Zhivkov's most memorable action may have been to be the only leader to ask, during the postwar period, to have his country admitted as the sixteenth republic of the Soviet Union.

Historically speaking, Bulgaria has not been a stable place, yet the Bulgarians seem to have survived it all remarkably well. They have developed a capacity to accommodate domination without compromising their cultural and national identity. Five hundred years of the Turks left some extraordinary convolutions in the decision-making process, but the overall impression is that the Bulgarians are tremendously resilient and wonderfully warm. In sharp contrast to neighboring Macedonia, there is almost nothing in the landscape of Bulgaria to attest to the fact that the Turks were ever here. Minarets, latticed windows, bazaars—where are they? To a large extent, they were removed by radical surgery under the Communist leader Zhivkov, who sought to eradicate the legacy of outside domination from the physical and cultural landscape of Bulgaria. Mosques were razed; non-Bulgarian names had to be "Bulgarianized." Thousands of Turks were officially encouraged to leave Bulgaria in the 1980s, and the remaining Turkish community has been targeted as an undesirable minority (at present, around 8 percent of the total population).

It is now hard to recall that Bulgaria was once the most unswerving Soviet surrogate—disposing of dissidents abroad with poisoned umbrellas and attempting to assassinate the pope. Within the Soviet orbit, Bulgaria, with only 9 million people, was

transformed from a successful prewar agricultural country into a center of heavy, often armament-related industries—most of which are now silent and obsolete.

Political transformation came to Bulgaria in the 1980s as economic stagnation developed into cynical corruption and chronic shortages. Zhivkov became more and more isolated as his unquestioning loyalty to the USSR took precedence over all other domestic considerations. As internal pressure for reform grew, the previously unflinching support from the USSR eventually collapsed in 1989 under the reforms of Gorbachev. The Bulgarian Communist Party had seen the writing on the wall and had made some limited concessions to buy time (and, I was repeatedly told, to borrow heavily on the hard currency market to the tune of $11 billion, which has now vanished; the Bulgarians, alone in Eastern Europe, have said that they will not repay the loans). Bulgaria's domestic political situation is far from resolved.

In June 1990, following the palace revolution that overthrew a very surprised Zhivkov, the country went to the polls in free elections for the first time in forty-five years. The outcome of these elections, agreed by all sides to be free and fair, was that the Communists (now called the Bulgarian Socialist Party) were returned to power with about 47 percent of the vote. At the time this book was written, the Union of Democratic Forces, a cocktail of anti-Communists, had come to power by the slimmest of margins in a subsequent election. This coalition of eleven parties was not destined to provide the cohesive leadership to challenge the old party machine, however. The largest single bloc of votes was still commanded by the renamed Communist Party, requiring the Union of Democratic Forces to overcome its initial reluctance and build ever-changing alliances with ethnic minority parties, such as that based on the Turkish population.

In rural areas, where communism had brought modest but measurable success, the Party still held sway.

Thus Susan and I arrived in Bulgaria at a time of transition, uncertainty, and doubt.

1

The Agenda

As is usual in these international adventures, everything was ridiculously rushed. Indeed, the finances for the three-month program arrived from the Fulbright offices the day before I left. The money itself presented a problem, since I knew that there was no regular banking system in Bulgaria that would enable me to deposit my stipend or even traveler's checks. There was, in short, no alternative but to take the money in $50 bills and hope for the best. I spent the next three months wandering around with more than $4,000 strapped to my person in a bulky money belt.

It is one of the requirements of the Fulbright program that the host organization provide accommodations, and I knew from my two previous short visits that the New Bulgarian University (NBU) was in no position to lay out the money to put Susan and me up in a hotel for three months. In addition, there is nothing more miserable than living in a hotel. Although hotels provide a range of services that relieve you of all sorts of basic concerns, they also take away whatever control you have over your life. And it is impossible to work in a hotel room where there is no writing surface and the light is uniformly miserable. Since we had no idea