

Hendrik Willem van Loon

VAN LOON'S GEOGRAPHY

II



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The Story of the World We Live in

II

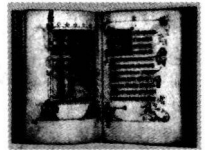


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Chapter 25

YUGOSLAVIA, ANOTHER PRODUCT OF THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

THE OFFICIAL NAME of this country is the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and the Slovenes. Of these three ethnical groups (tribes sounds too much like African natives and might offend them) the Serbs, who are the most important, live in the east along the banks of the Save which joins the Danube at a point where the capital Belgrade has been built. The Croats live in the center between the Drave, also a tributary of the Danube, and the Adriatic, while the Slovenes occupy the little triangle between the Drave, the Istrian peninsula and Croatia. Modern Serbia however is composed of several other racial groups. It has absorbed Montenegro, the picturesque mountain state, famous for its four hundred years of war against the Turks, and affectionately remembered ever since the days we danced to the tune of "The Merry Widow" waltz. And it also has annexed a well-known remnant of the old Austrian Empire, the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, old Serbian territory, but taken away from Turkey by the Austrians, and the source of that ill-feeling between the Serbians and the Austrians which finally ended in the murder of Serajevo in 1914, the immediate (although by no means the real) cause of the Great War.



The Hours of Jeanne d'evreux,
ca. 1324-1328, Jean Pucelle
(French, active in Paris, ca.
1320-34), Made in Paris.



Cold

Serbia (the old habit is too strong—hereafter when I write Serbia I really mean the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) is essentially a Balkan state and its history is essentially that of a country subjected to five hundred years of Moslem slavery. Since the war it has a sea-front on the Adriatic, but it remains cut off from its own sea-front by the Dinaric Alps. Even if it could build railroads across the Dinaric Alps (and railroads cost a lot of money) there would be no convenient harbors except perhaps Ragusa (or Dubrovnik, as it is now called), one of the great medieval distributing centers for colonial merchandise. It was the only Mediterranean city which refused to accept defeat after the discovery of the direct ocean routes to America and India and it continued to send its far-famed Argosies (ships from Aragusia) to Calicut and Cuba until a foolish participation in the ill-fated expedition of the Armada deprived it of its last remaining squadrons.

Unfortunately Dubrovnik offers no facilities to modern steamers. As for Flume and Trieste, the natural outlets for Serbia, the Old Men of Versailles gave one of these cities to Italy and the other one she took for herself, although she really had no need for them as they would only compete with Venice, which aspired to regain its ancient and honorable position as mistress of the Adriatic. As a result, the grass now grows in the dockyards of Trieste and Flume while Serbia, as of old, must send its agricultural products by one of three routes. It may send them down the Danube to the Black Sea, which is about as practical as if New York should export its merchandise to London by way of Lake Erie and the St. Lawrence River. It may send them up the Danube to Vienna and from there through one of the mountain passes to Bremen, Hamburg or Rotterdam, which is also an exceedingly expensive procedure. Or it may send them by rail to Flume, where the Italians of course do their best to ruin their Slavic competitors.

In this respect, therefore, nothing has been changed since the days before the war when Serbia was kept a land-locked state at the instigation

of the Austrian Empire. It is a bit sad to reflect that pigs were primarily responsible for the outbreak of that terrible disaster. For Serbia had only one great article of export—pigs—and by putting impossible duties on pigs, the Austrians and the Hungarians were able to ruin the only trade from which Serbia derived any profit at all. The dead Austrian Grand Duke was the pretext for the mobilization of all the armed forces of Europe. But the underlying cause of all the ill-feeling in the north-eastern corner of the Balkans was the duty on pigs.

And speaking of pigs, pigs prosper on acorns. That is why they were so plentiful in the triangle between the Adriatic and the Danube and the mountains of Macedonia, for it is densely covered with oak forests. There would be more forests today if the Romans and the Venetians had not denuded these hills in a most irresponsible fashion to get wood for their vessels.

What other resources does the country have to feed and clothe its 12,000,000 inhabitants, outside of pigs? There is some coal and iron but there seems to be already by far too much coal and iron in this world, and it would be very costly to carry it all the way by rail to one of the German ports, and as I have said before, Serbia has no decent harbor of its own.

After the war Serbia got part of the great Hungarian plain, the so-called *Voyvodika*, which is good agricultural land. The valleys of the Drave and Save will provide it with enough grain and corn for its own people. The Morava valley connecting with that of the Vardar River is a good enough trade-route which connects northern Europe with Saloniki on the Aegean Sea. It is really a branch of the great trunk lines connecting Nish (the birthplace of Constantine the Great and the spot where Frederick Barbarossa, on his ill-fated expedition to the Holy Land, was entertained for a while by the famous Serbian Prince Stephen) with Constantinople and Asia Minor.

But, generally speaking, Serbia cannot look forward to a great future

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as an industrial state. Like Bulgaria it will have to remain a nation of fairly prosperous Slavic farmers. Who has ever been able to compare a six-foot peasant from Skoplje (or Uskub) or Mitrovitsa to a cockney workman from Manchester or Sheffield will have some doubts whether such a fate is entirely without its compensations. Belgrade may forever remain an amiable little country town like Oslo or Bern, but does it really want to compete in size with Birmingham or Chicago? Perhaps it does. The modern soul is a strange thing and the Serbian peasant would not be the first to have his sound ancestral standard of values upset by the counterfeit cultural ideals of our Hollywood prophets.

Chapter 26

BULGARIA, THE SOUNDEST OF ALL BALKAN COUNTRIES, WHOSE BUTTERFLY COLLECTING KING BET ON THE WRONG HORSE DURING THE GREAT WAR AND SUFFERED THE CONSEQUENCES

THIS IS THE LAST of the little principalities that grew out of the great Slavic invasion of some twenty centuries ago. It would be more important in size and number of inhabitants if during the World War it had not taken what ultimately proved to be the wrong side. But such things will happen even in the best regulated nations. Better luck next time. On the Balkan peninsula, the "next time", when speaking of war, means a dozen or half a dozen years hence. We are apt to speak in a slightly contemptuous manner of these half-civilized Balkan people who are forever fighting among each other. But do we ever realize with what sort of an inheritance of strife and cruelty and bloodshed and slavery and plunder and rape and arson the average Serbian or Bulgarian boy starts out upon his career through life?

Of the earliest inhabitants of Bulgaria we know nothing. We have found their skeletons, but skulls do



The Hours of Jeanne d'Arc, ca. 1324-1328, Jean Pucelle (French, active in Paris, ca. 1320-34), Made in Paris.

not talk. Were they perhaps related to those mysterious Albanians, the Illyrians of Greek history, compatriots of the long-suffering Odysseus, that mysterious race which speaks a tongue unlike that of any other people on earth, who ever since the beginning of history have maintained themselves among the Dinaric Alps along the coast of the Adriatic and who today form an independent state, ruled over by a native tribal leader who made himself their legitimate sovereign as soon as a Vienna tailor had provided him with a nice, new uniform in which to hold court at Tirano, the new capital of a nation of 98% analphabets? Or is this the home country of the Romani, who were also known as the Wlachs and who must have spread all over Europe as they also bestowed their name upon Wales and the Welsh and the Walloons of Belgium? We had better leave the solution of that puzzle to the philologists and confess that we do not know.

But when we reach the era of the written chronicles, what endless invasions, wars and calamities! There were, as I have already told you, two main routes leading from the gap between the Urals and the Caspian Sea to the west. One went northward of the Carpathians and led to the impenetrable forests of the northern European plain. The other followed the Danube and by means of the Brenner Pass carried the hungry savages to the heart of Italy. The Romans knew this and they therefore used the Balkans as their first line of defence against that "foreign scum", as they were pleased to call those despised barbarians who eventually were to destroy them. Lack of soldiers gradually forced them to retreat to their own peninsula and leave the Balkan peoples to their fate. When the great migrations had come to an end, not a trace remained of the original Bulgarians. The Slavs had assimilated them so completely that not a single word of the ancient Bulgarian tongue survives in the Slavic dialect spoken by the so-called Bulgarians of today.

The position however of the new conquerors was exceedingly precarious. In the south they had to deal with Byzantium, that eastern

remnant of the Roman Empire which was Roman in name only but Greek in purpose and structure. From the north and the west they were forever threatened by raids on the part of the Hungarians and the Albanians. Next the Crusaders passed through their territory, an unholy army of holy men, the disinherited from all nations, ready to plunder Turk or Slav with equal ferocity. Finally the threat of an all-overpowering Turkish invasion and those last desperate appeals to Europe to come and protect the common soil of Christendom against the degrading touch of the infidel. And the sudden hush that spread through the land when fugitives from the Bosphorus told how the Moslem Sultan had ridden his horse up the steps of Saint Sofia to desecrate the most holy of all the holy shrines of the Greek church. Followed by the panic when the reddening sky of burning villages told of the steady advance of Turkish troops, marching westward through the blood-soaked valley of the Maritza. And thereafter four entire centuries of Turkish misrule. And then, at last, during the beginning of the last century, a first faint stirring of hope. A swineherd in Serbia started a rebellion that was to make him a king. Next that terrible war of extermination between Greek and Ottoman, turned into a major European issue by an English poet who hobbled to his welcome death in the pestiferous village of Missolonghi. And then the beginning of that great struggle for liberty which was to last for another hundred years. Let us be lenient in judging our Balkan friends. They have been the leading actors in the tragedy of man's martyrdom.

Among the modern Balkan states, Bulgaria is one of the most important. It is composed of two very fertile regions, both of them excellently suited to all sorts of agriculture: the plain in the north between the high ridge of the Balkan Mountains and the Danube, and the plain of Philippopolis in the south between the Balkans and the Rhodope Mountains. This valley, protected on both sides, enjoys a mild

Mediterranean climate. It exports its products through the harbor of Burgas, just as the sterner products of the northern plain, grain and corn, are sent abroad by way of Varna.

Otherwise there are very few towns, for the Bulgarians are essentially a peasant people. Sofia, the present capital, lies on the old trade-routes from north to south and east to west. For almost four hundred years it was the residence of the Turkish governors who, from their fortified palace on the Struma River, ruled the whole of the Balkan peninsula, with the exception of Bosnia and Greece.

When Europe finally became conscious of the plight of its fellow-Christians, delivered to the mercies of the Moslem invaders, Mr. Gladstone's constituents did a great deal of talking about the Bulgarian atrocities; but the Russians were the first to take action. Twice their armies crossed the Balkan Mountains. The fighting to force the Shipka Pass and to subdue the fortress of Plevna will be remembered as long as people realize that there have been a few wars which were absolutely unavoidable, if the world was ever to progress from slavery to comparative freedom.

As a result of the last of these Slavic relief-expeditions, the great Russo-Turkish conflict of 1877-1878, Bulgaria was made an independent principality under a ruler of German origin. This meant that the patient and intelligent Bulgarian peasants got trained by people with a Teutonic sense of order. That may be responsible for the fact that today Bulgaria has the best schools of all the different Balkan states. The large land-owners have completely disappeared. The peasant owns his own land as he does in Denmark and in France. The illiteracy percentage has been sharply reduced and everybody works. It is a simple country of farmers and lumbermen. It is a veritable reservoir of physical endurance and energy. Like Serbia, it may never be able to compete with the industrialized states of western Europe. But it may still be there when the others are gone.

Chapter 27

ROUMANIA, A COUNTRY WHICH HAS OIL AND A ROYAL FAMILY

THE LIST OF THE Slavic nations of the Balkans has come to an end. But there exists one other Balkan state which none of us, however, is likely to forget, as it has a habit of crashing into the front pages of our newspapers with a frequency that is at times a bit painful. That is not the fault of the Roumanian peasants. They are born and till their fields and die very much as peasants are in the habit of doing all the world over. It is due to the incurable vulgarity and the unspeakable bad taste of that Anglo-German dynasty which thirty years ago succeeded the highly respectable Prince Charles of Hohenzollern on the throne of a kingdom founded by the grace of God, Prince Bismarck and a certain Benjamin Disraeli.



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ca. 1324-1328, Jean Pucelle
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1320-34), Made in Paris.

It was in the year 1878 that these two gentlemen came together in Berlin and after paying their duties to the Deity decided to elevate Walachia (the land of the Walachs) to the rank of an independent principality. If the present reigning family can ever be persuaded to remove itself to Paris, where people do not care how much dirty laundry is washed, as long as it is done with French soap, Roumania may go far, for Nature has been extraordinarily kind to this great plain between the

Carpathians, the Transylvanian Alps and the Black Sea. Not only could it be turned into a granary as rich as that of the Russian Ukraine, of which it is the natural continuation, but the richest oil deposits of Europe are to be found near the city of Ploesci, where the Transylvanian Mountains join the plains of Walachia.

Unfortunately, the farms both of Walachia and Bessarabia between the Danube and the Prut are in the hands of large landowners, most of them absentee landlords who spend their revenues in Bucharest, the capital, or in Paris, but never among the people whose labor makes them rich.

As for the petroleum, the capital invested is usually owned abroad; and the same is true of the iron deposits of Siebenbergen or Transylvania, the enormous complex of mountains taken away from Hungary and given to Roumania in exchange for the more than highly doubtful services which the latter country had rendered the Allies during the Great War. But as Transylvania had originally been part of the old Roman province of Dacia, and had been made part of Hungary as late as the twelfth century, and as the Hungarians had treated the Roumanians of Transylvania very much as the Roumanians of old Roumania treat the Hungarian minority of Transylvania today, we might just as well forget about it. These hopeless and intricate national puzzles can never be solved until every idea of nationalism shall have disappeared from the face of the earth. At the moment of going to press there seems to be little chance that such a miracle will happen.

According to the latest available statistics, the former Kingdom of Roumania counted 5,500,000 Roumanians and 500,000 Gypsies, Jews, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Armenians and Greeks. The new Roumania, the so-called Greater Roumania, has 17,000,000 inhabitants, of which 73% are Roumanians, 11% Hungarians, 4.8% Ukrainians, 4.3% Germans and 3.3% Russians in Bessarabia and the Dubrudja, the land south of the

delta of the Danube. As all these races dislike each other most cordially, do not in any way belong to the same ethnographical stock, but happen to have been thrown together by the artificial decisions of a peace conference, the material is there for a first-rate civil war, unless the foreign creditors intervene to save their investments.

Bismarck once said that the whole of the Balkans was not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. One feels that in this, as in so many other things, the grouchy old founder of the last German Empire may have been right.

Chapter 28

HUNGARY, OR WHAT REMAINS OF IT

THE HUNGARIANS, or Magyars, as they prefer to call themselves, are very proud of the fact that they are the only people of Mongolian origin who were able to maintain themselves on European soil and to found a kingdom of their own, for their distant cousins, the Finns, were until very recently always a part of somebody else's empire or kingdom. Perhaps the Hungarians in their present misery have stressed their great warlike qualities a little more than was strictly necessary. But no one can deny that as a bulwark against the Turks they have rendered a tremendously important service to the rest of Europe. The Pope recognized the value of this buffer state when he raised the Magyar chieftain, Stephen, to the rank of Apostolic King of Hungary.

For when the Turks overran eastern Europe, it was Hungary which kept them within bounds. They were the first barrier, as Poland was to prove the second when Hungary at last was overrun. Under the leadership of one John Hunyadi, a humble nobleman of Vladic origin, Hungary became in truth one of the few defenders of the faith who was entitled to that name. But those same wide plains on both sides of the Tisia and Danube, which had so greatly attracted the Tartar horsemen that they



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had decided to settle down for good, were to prove the source of many internal evils.

Wide open spaces make it comparatively easy for a few strong men to dominate their neighbors. For where can the poor peasants go when there is neither sea nor mountains? Hungary therefore became a country of large land-owners. Far removed from the center of government, the land-owners maltreated their peasants so outrageously that soon the latter cared very little whether they were Magyar or Turk.

When Sultan Suleiman the Great marched against the West in the year 1526, the last of the Hungarian kings could not collect more than 25,000 men when he tried to stop the Mohammedans. On the plain of Mohacs this Hungarian army was completely annihilated. Twenty-four thousand out of a total of 25,000 perished. The King himself was killed, together with all his advisers, and more than 100,000 Hungarians were dragged back to Constantinople to be sold to the slave-dealers of Asia Minor. The greater part of Hungary was annexed to Turkey. The rest was occupied by the Austrian Habsburgs who then began a tug of war with the Mohammedans for the unhappy land until the beginning of the eighteenth century when all of Hungary became part of the Habsburg domains.

Then, however, a new struggle for independence was started, the war against the German masters, and it continued for two entire centuries. The Hungarians fought with reckless bravery, and at last they were able to achieve a semblance of independence by recognizing the Emperor of Austria as Apostolic King of Hungary, and acquiring the status of a dominion.

But no sooner had they obtained what they considered merely to be their own good right than they must start upon a policy of persecution against all those who were not of Magyar blood. This policy was so short-sighted and deprived of common sense that soon they were without a friend in the whole wide world. They noticed this during the Congress

of Versailles, when the number of inhabitants of the ancient Apostolic kingdom was reduced from 21,000,000 to 8,000,000 and three-fourths of all its former territory bestowed upon deserving neighbors.

This left Hungary a mere shadow of its old glorious self, a state not unlike Austria, one big city without any hinterland. Hungary was never very much of an industrial country. The large land-owners had had a prejudice against those ungainly chimneys that are an indispensable part of all well-regulated factories and they had not cared for the smell of smoke. As a result the Hungarian plain remained available for the purposes of agriculture, and Hungary today has the highest percentage of agricultural land of any country. Since most of this has always been under cultivation, the people should have been comparatively well off; yet the prevailing poverty has been so great that between 1896 and 1910 the country lost almost a million inhabitants through emigration.

As for the subject races of the old kingdom, the Magyar minority knew so well how to make its subjects uncomfortable that they too moved away by the boatload and the trainful, to help in the development of our own nation. We may as well give you a few figures, for what happened in Hungary happened to a lesser extent in practically all those countries where a small class of hereditary landlords had succeeded in making themselves supreme.

Just before the beginning of the Turkish wars of the sixteenth century, the Hungarian plain was densely populated and had more than 5,000,000 inhabitants. The Turkish domination reduced that number to 3,000,000 in a little less than two centuries. When finally the Austrians had driven the Turks away from the Puszta (the Magyar name for the plains), Hungary was so sparsely populated that immigrants from all over central Europe hastened to occupy the deserted farms. But the Magyar nobles, considering themselves the dominant race, the fighting race *par excellence*, would grant unto those newcomers none of the rights which they themselves enjoyed. The subject races, therefore, who