

Book Review

Tomes, Jason Hunter. 2004. *King Zog of Albania: Europe's Self-Made Muslim Monarch*. New York: New York University Press. ISBN 0-8147-8283-3.

Tomes' monograph on Zog fills a definite gap in the historical literature on interwar Albania. Historical research on Zog's Albania by Western scholars have tended to provide an important balance to the ideologically tinged historiography of socialist-era Albanian historians, as evidenced not only in official publications issued by the Albanian Academy of Sciences, like in the standardized master-narrative of *Historia e Shqipërisë*, but also in more specialized works by authors such as Viron Koka (1985), Mentar Belegu (1987), and Iljaz Fishta (1989). But even English-language monographs on the interwar era in Albania are limited in number and scope. The most notable volumes in this subfield of Albania's political history are certainly Joseph Swire's detailed but limited description of political events in his 1930 classic, *Albania, the Rise of a Kingdom* (republished in 1971), and Bernd J. Fischer's *King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania* (1984). Tomes' volume is an important addition to the literature whose topic deals with one of the most interesting, understudied, and perhaps most critical phases in Albania's evolution as a nation-state. It is no wonder that there is a discrepancy between the title and content of the book, which, while purporting to present a biography of Ahmet Zogu, is in fact much more than a personal history of the man.

When speaking of Zog the man, the impression will not fail to register on the reader that Tomes' primary interest is in Zog the *political* man, for while the book explores aspects of Zog's private life, the narrative mainly focuses on Zog's political activities. Zog certainly had an affinity with power and authority from a very young age, given his social origin. The son of Xhemal Zogolli (the original family name which Zog later shortened by removing its Turkish suffix), one of Mati's ruling families, the young Ahmet found himself growing up in the midst of political turmoil of the late-day Ottoman Empire. Zog's first experience with political radicalism was his exposure to the ideas of the Young Turks during his educational stint in Istanbul, but the young student who came to admire Napoleon had his schooling cut short, only to find himself leading his regional clansmen into

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battle against the Ottoman army in the struggle for an independent Albania. This happened while Zog was only sixteen years old. His later rise would be rapid. At twenty-five Zog became Minister of Interior, at twenty-nine Prime Minister, at thirty-three Albania's first modern monarch.

Tomes tells us of Zog's rapid rise to prominence within the politics of the newly independent Albanian state and his direct role in all succeeding regimes attempting to provide the new state with a steady institutional base of centralized rule. While Zog is primarily remembered for his rule as King of Albania, Tomes succeeds in conveying the sense that Zog's rise was never preordained, whatever political aspirations Zog himself may have entertained, of which we get an occasional glimpse. Unlike figures like Ismail Qemajli, who was central to the struggle for independence but became sidelined after the nationalist struggle succeeded in gaining international recognition for Albania, Zog was closely involved in Albanian state-building efforts from the very start. After the dissolution of Qemajli's Provisional Government, whom Zog had served, he enlisted himself in the service of the short-lived kingdom of Prince Wied. With the onset of World War I and the Wied's departure, Zog remained engaged in internal political struggles between Albania's rival factions, leading at one point in 1915 to a direct confrontation (as a colonel in the Austrian army) with troops loyal to Esad Pasha, large landowner and aspiring ruler of Albania.

Zog's political and military involvement in Albanian wartime politics was briefly interrupted when the Austrians found his presence in Albania displeasing and forced him into exile in Vienna. Though it is an episode of Zog's life inadequately treated in the book, Tomes suggests that Zog's prolonged stay in Vienna and his association with elite social circles was highly influential in the development of his mature ideological orientation. Tomes believes that while Zog's sojourn in Vienna may have taught him that Albanians "needed to repudiate the Ottoman period and catch up with the rest of Europe," his political socialization may have been limited to picking up "something superficial about western constitutional forms" (p. 36). More significantly perhaps than speculation on the depth of Zog's juridical knowledge is the pointing out of Zog's later recollection of his stay. Zog related that once, while standing in front of the helmet of Albania's medieval hero Skënderbeg, on display at Vienna's Imperial Museum, he fantasized about placing it on his head, thereby emulating the image of Austrian Emperor Karl, popularly depicted with an ancient Magyar crown. That may be partly indicative of Zog's gradual development of an ambition to become ruler of the nation, as well as his fascination with pomp and uniform in his later life as head of state (though Zog was by no means the only, and by no means the most prominent, interwar authoritarian leader to develop such a taste). But, while Vienna may be partly responsible for the development of Zog's personal ambitions, it also illustrated some of the future difficulties the king would face in his attempts to integrate with the social elites of the West. Tomes' volume provides many examples that show

how Zog's challenge to establish himself as king was not only overpowering domestic rivals and outmaneuvering imperial interests, but also gaining legitimacy among the West's statesmen and noble aristocracy as an equal, given the tremendous difficulties the position of an upstart monarch brought to him (which may also explain why depictions of Zog in the Western press tended to verge on the exotic, if not on the ridiculous). Zog's decision to break off his engagement with the daughter of the wealthy Albanian landowner of the south, Shefqet Vërlaci, and to instead marry Countess Geraldine Apponyi de Nagy-Aponyi, with family ties to the aristocracy of the Habsburg Empire, may be seen as part of Zog's effort to break away from his commonly ascribed membership in the company of "Oriental despots" and literally wed himself to the hereditary nobility of Europe. Along with Zog's alienation of the landowners through his ultimately failed effort at redistributing their land to peasants, the personal animosity created between Zog and Vërlaci by virtue of this incident may partly explain the enthusiasm with which the latter accepted the position of Prime Minister in the government set up by Rome after the eviction of Zog by Italian troops in April 1939.

Tomes provides many details on Zog's ability to survive the shifting balances of international power and the changing domestic relations of force that determined the fate of the young Albanian state, but certainly the most significant is Zog's ability to retain, from a very young age, the loyalty of the fighting men of Mati. Though we gain no real sense of who these die-hard loyalists are (with the exception of a very unflattering description of Zog's confidant from Mati, Abdurrahman Krosi), their presence at every critical juncture of Zog's road to power is made evident. And so is that of his mother, with whom Zog had a close relationship, as well as his sisters, whom he unhesitatingly enlisted in his campaign to Westernize the appearance and demeanor of Albanian women. In the 1930s, Zog's had his otherwise extremely reserved sisters flaunt their Western dress and make public appearances throughout Albania, as exemplars of how modern Albanian ought to appear and behave in public. Bits and details of this nature allow the book to offer a rather pleasant divergence from what sometimes seems as a heavily political history to allow us to gain an appreciation of the everydayness of social life in Albania in Zog's time, in particular the social milieu of diplomats and foreign reporters with whom he interacted. A chapter on Tirana's transformation under Zog is also a rare feat, enabling the reader gain a visceral sense of the ways in which this once provincial market-town was quickly and irreversibly, under Zog's personal initiative, transforming into a modern national capital. This particular chapter is an exhibition of a first rate social history, though we are quickly reminded about the political dimensions of what was happening: namely, the role of Italian capital and the heavy political (and personal) price Zog had to pay for his modernizing ambitions in the end.

Unsurprisingly, though consisting of only eleven years of his life, more than a third of the book is accorded to Zog's tenure as King. The last part is devoted to Zog's life after Albania's invasion by Italy and his forced exile, his failed quest to gain British support to return to the Albanian throne after the war, and the rather depressing story of Zog in old age. Nonetheless, some interesting personal stories of this period are also to be found, such as the anecdote of Zog calmly snatching his wallet back from a pickpocket in a crowded elevator at a department store in London, or the family's efforts to maintain the outward appearance of royal grandeur in spite of increasing financial difficulties.

Overall, this is a very informative and useful insight into the life of Zog, the times that shaped him and the period he shaped. Though published by an academic press, the book is not intended only for specialized readers, which may also explain the part of the book's title describing Zog, a deeply secular ruler, as a "*Muslim* monarch," a decision that may reflect an attempt on the part of the publisher to capitalize on the recent surge of interest in Islam, particularly in the US. One is tempted to think that if the book was published a decade ago, at the height of the Yugoslav wars of succession, it would have probably described Zog as a "*Balkan* monarch." As is, the title does leave a potentially misleading impression on the contents of the book and the man who is its subject. On the other hand, the book is an easy read, organized in short chapters of only a few pages long, detailing particular episodes that are chronologically organized.

The drawback of the book, like many other English-language books on the period, is that it relies solely on English-language publications as its primary sources. The perspective we get on Zog is therefore largely the perspective foreigners had of him. The book is evidently not a biography authorized by Zog's family, since no family members are interviewed, nor are any of Zog's personal materials consulted (though Tomes notes that Zog wrote sparingly and that his small personal archive was destroyed in 1941). Neither did the author consult any materials held by public archives in Albania. It is paradoxical that Zog's voice, which the book purports to convey, is never really given to us authentically, since all quotes from Zog are in fact English-language transcriptions from diplomatic reports, memoirs and press reports, primarily those published in English and written by Westerners. Granted, Tomes is not a professional historian and his work cannot therefore, apropos academic standards, be chastised for writing the history of a country whose language he cannot comprehend. At any rate, Orientalist tropes and dichotomies underlie some of his analysis, though Tomes is not in the habit of referring all explanation of events to the alleged "Oriental" character of Albanian politics – or of Zog's own personality – as does, for instance, Fischer in his comparable volume. The book has another drawback, one that will be noted by social scientists. It is the tendency in this semi-journalistic genre of history-writing to interpret all causes and outcomes of political events as stemming from the abilities or the personal character of the actors directly

involved, at the direct expense of a sociological analysis of conditions and the relations of power that may have determined the flow of events, or the cultural and ideological context within which Zog's political decisions were made. It would be unfair to state, however, that Tomes makes no effort at accomplishing the former, though the results are mixed. At any rate, the value of a book like this is not necessarily the force of its analysis, but that it provides an important empirical base for gaining a primary understanding of how a man, once described by a British newspaper as a man "dreaming of a white uniform" who "came from nowhere" and with "nowhere to go" (p. 256) ended up leaving an indelible mark on the political and social history of Albania.

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