

and ultranationalism undeniably shaped human interactions. Yet they also show that there are many nuances in these interactions depending on the particularities of the place, the participants, and the direction of movement. This makes the collection dynamic because it treats the Balkans and its inhabitants as active agents of history. The volume does not minimize the fact that the region is often subjected to essentialization from without, but it does elevate the fact that it is also an agent of many other forms of interaction, such as nesting orientalism, from within. As the editors succinctly explain, the volume offers three distinct lenses for exploring encounters among people: “how people within the Balkans view *their* others, how the West views people from the Balkans, and how emigrants from the Balkans reflect upon their experiences as members of cosmopolitan diasporic communities” (1). The first and the third are particularly interesting contributions to scholarship.

Some chapters in *Cultures of Mobility and Alterity* present surprising findings about encounters in the Balkans. For instance, Rucker-Chang’s fascinating chapter “(Re)imagining Solidarities, (Re)imagining Serbia: South-South Student Mobility and the ‘World in Serbia’ Project” explores a scholarship program that Serbia began offering to non-aligned member and observer states in 2010 that mirrored the one socialist Yugoslavia had once hosted. Rucker-Chang notes that this program was unusual because it launched at a time of global economic crisis, and, moreover, because it has been surprisingly successful. Relying on interviews with scholarship recipients from different states and at different stages in their education and postgraduation career, Rucker-Chang suggests that they have an overwhelmingly positive outlook on Serbia and that they serve as a sort of “cultural diplomats.” The volume also includes studies of grimmer engagements of Balkan residents with outsiders. In the chapter “Refugees and TV Current Affairs Journalism: The Epistemology of Conventions,” for instance, Breda Luthar argues that mainstream Slovene media was just as complicit as social media, fake news, and tabloid media in normalizing right wing populist and nationalist narratives toward people from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq during the refugee crisis in 2015.

The authors in the collection rely on an array of different methodologies, including psychological, anthropological, ethnographical, and cultural ones. They are also in dialogue with major disciplinary trends such as colonialism and postcolonialism, socialism and post-socialism, race and racialization, and media studies. Most notably, they investigate the questions of movement to, from, and through the Balkans by drawing on a variety of sources like oral history, theater, literature, and media. While it can sometimes feel like the volume lacks cohesion beyond the general theme, most of the chapters set out to combat the dehumanization ascribed to the region’s residents as well as outsiders or “others” everywhere. Additionally, they directly respond to global problems of migration, which are all the more relevant in the aftermath of pandemic border closures. *Cultures of Mobility and Alterity* is a collection of thoughtful reflections on encounters in and out of the Balkans, and scholars of the region will likely find a topic of interest therein.

## **Ed. James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers. *Lakes and Empires in Macedonian History: Contesting the Waters.***

**London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. xvi, 217 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Tables. Maps. \$28.76, paper.**

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This monograph is a rare example of a history book that employs a *longue durée* perspective to narrate a regional transformation in the Balkans. The Prespa region, shared between

North Macedonia, Albania, and Greece, is centered on the two lakes bearing the same name and the marshes and mountains surrounding it. Using a chronologic narration and an accessible style, it also appeals to an interested public beyond the narrow field of academia. It examines continuities and changes that shaped the political, economic, and social configuration of the region since prehistoric times. Its stated goal is twofold: on the one hand, to connect the people, history, and environment of the Prespa region, and on the other, to place real and invisible borders at the core of this story, dwelling on their acceptability for those living there (10).

The great strength of *Lakes and Empires in Macedonian History* is its regional focus, allowing for an in-depth analysis of multilayered historical interactions that only become visible when one zooms in to the grass-root level. This approach shows how different scales of historical transformation from the international, imperial, national, to the local manifested in the Prespa region. Since one characteristic of the areas was its high ethnic diversity, the authors do a wonderful job of showing how these changes affected the household level and how they reshaped the ties of the extended family (zadruga). Various political systems, such as the Roman and Ottoman empires or nation states co-opted local families, offering protection and economic opportunities. The most visible local effects of state consolidation included new taxation, resource exploitation (for instance of timber or fish), and since the nineteenth century, the conversion of commonly owned pastures into private or state farms. Technology and state intervention were the two main drivers of change in the region, transforming both the landscape and social relations. Colonization, irrigation channels, land terracing, marsh drainage, and later railroad connections re-ordered economic ties and other relations within and beyond the region.

Yet, in spite of this long history of outside intervention, the Prespa lakes and its surroundings remained a peripheral region where modernization projects only slowly gained track. The transhumant, semi-nomadic way of life and transnational kin-relations persisted well into the twentieth century. Such lingering continuity is best illustrated by the local Vlach community, whose peripatetic life often transcended clear-cut physical demarcations and ideological identities. It is quite telling that this community did not form its own national movement. Broadly speaking, multiple linguistic skills and fluid cultural identities that were wide-spread in the region challenged rigid national belongings. In an attempt to forge loyal citizens, education and religion turned into battlegrounds of the newly established nation states. Soon enough, the whole region was engulfed in military conflict in which armies, irregular troops and insurgents violently clashed over ideology and identity. All major armed conflicts of the twentieth century were bitterly fought in the Prespa region, with devastating local effects. The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia spilled over into the lake region, while vocal Greek and Bulgarian nationalism impeded the international recognition of independent North Macedonia. In light of several international agreements that had been recently signed in the region, the transboundary Prespa National Park, jointly administered by the three neighboring states, could become a beacon of hope for local reconciliation and for sustainable environmental management.

The environmental component of this story is the most fascinating one and is also the lesser-known story. The *longue durée* perspective allows the reader to follow the pace of landscape transformation and gauge the impact of human intervention in different historical epochs. Until the nineteenth century, the authors remark, the pace of human induced changes, centered around practices of fishing, hunting, foraging, and grazing was slow. In the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman government introduced capitalist relations in the region, accelerating the pace of resource exploitation. The twentieth century came with a mixed bag of environmental issues: on the one hand, intensive agriculture led to soil degradation and low water levels, while on the other hand, depopulation caused by wars and interethnic conflicts enabled the fish and bird stocks to replenish. In this context, it is a pity that the two authors did not engage with the concepts of “Anthropocene” and “Capitalocene” to explain how the transformation of the Prespa fits into the global environmental debate.

Also, they identify the region as having had the quality of wilderness (13–14). Since the debate around “wilderness” and its reimagination during modernity is so central to environmental history, I wondered how the Prespa region might contribute to it. In spite of these shortcomings, the book is a useful and overarching examination of a storied, transnational Balkan region.

## **Luminita Gatejel. *Engineering the Lower Danube: Technology and International Cooperation in an Imperial Borderland.***

**Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022. xvi, 331 pp. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Maps. \$95.00, hard bound.**

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Despite the Danube’s centrality to the geography of the European continent, those who lived along its banks frequently complained that it flowed “in the wrong direction,” away from the economically advanced countries of Europe’s Atlantic rim. A series of rocky cataracts in the region of the Iron Gates and the natural silting of the Danube’s delta further reduced the river’s role as an access route to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The new book by Luminita Gatejel offers a well-documented and well-written account of the responses of the European engineers, commissioners, and entrepreneurs to these challenges over the course of the nineteenth century.

Gatejel argues that engineers played a key role in the transformation of the Lower Danube, “converting visions into concrete technical projects” and keeping them alive when political decision makers lost interest or lacked resources (6). Animated by the engineers, the river regulation commissions emerged as “epistemic communities” exchanging and producing knowledge (8–9). They also exercised a form of “collective imperialism” or “hydroimperialism” with respect to some riparian states that lacked either the motivation or the technical expertise to regulate the river (11–13).

The first two chapters of the book are devoted to the early Habsburg and Russian efforts to reclaim the Danube for their own purposes. Motivated by mercantilist or military-strategic considerations, these efforts generated maps, surveys, and descriptions that rendered the river “legible” to potential readers, and created the preconditions for a variety of interventions “under the banner of reform and progress” (78–79). Gatejel demonstrates that the first Austrian project to improve the navigability of the Danube at the Iron Gates in the mid-1830s revealed a growing importance of civilian “experts” in state interventionist policies (97). In parallel, the early British and Austrian efforts to reverse the silting of the delta during the 1840s were frustrated by Russia’s uncooperative attitude; only the creation of the European Commission on the Danube (ECD) in the wake of the Crimean war (1853–56) promised to change the situation.

The ECD was part of the institutional and legal framework created at the Paris Peace Conference of 1856 to overcome “the physical, territorial, and legal fragmentation of the Danube” (131). However, the opposite occurred in practice as Ch. 3 and 4 demonstrate. Austria managed to secure navigation rights after the riverine states in the upper Danube,