

Reviews

The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453. By Dimitri Obolensky. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971. Illus. \$15.00.)

A good number of excellent monographs have been published on the peoples who one way or another came into the sphere of influence of the Byzantine Empire in the Balkan or Danube area. Such are, for instance, Runciman's *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire*, Jireček's *Geschichte der Bulgaren* and *Geschichte der Serben*, Dvornik's *The Slavs in European History and Civilization* and *The Slavs: Their Early History and Civilization*, Macartney's *The Magyars in the Ninth Century*, and others. As their titles indicate, these works are mostly concerned with the development of these peoples as racial and national units; their points of contact with Byzantium are viewed only as one of its chapters.

There are several works, on the other hand, whose main focus is the relationship of any one of these nations to the Empire. Among them we have Lipsic's *Byzanz und die Slaven: Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte des 6.-9. Jahrhunderts*, Dvornik's *Les Slaves, Byzance et Rome au IX^e siècle*, Darko's *Byzantinisch-ungarische Beziehungen in der zweiten Hälfte des XIII Jahrhunderts* and Heisenberg's *Ungarn und Byzanz*.

The uniqueness of the work under review is that in a compact volume it brings together the interaction of all the peoples who, as foes or allies, affected the life of Byzantium in Eastern Europe, and were affected by it, from the sixth century till the end. Professor Obolensky seems to have been aware of the need for a book like this from the time he wrote the lively chapter for Vol. IV of the new edition of the *Cambridge Medieval History*. This book is a welcome and vast amplification of that chapter.

The title itself of the work, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, would be misleading if one does not read the introduction of the author in which he justifies it as an ambiguous translation of the ambiguity contained in the Byzantine terms used to express the unique relationship to the Empire of the nations which invaded its eastern European territory. Actually, the book embraces more than that area; it goes further: to the Caucasus and the Russian southern steppe belt whose inhabitants held the access to the Balkans and whose friendship

the Byzantines assiduously cultivated. Later on, the Russians also entered the Byzantine sphere of influence, as Professor Obolensky competently discusses the point, and thus had a place in the Byzantine Commonwealth.

The author offers a detailed but readable account of the changing character of that relationship and of the enduring culture influence which the Empire exercised over those nations, from the reign of Justinian to 1453. The Avars, Slavs, Bulgarians, Serbians and Croats came first as marauders or allies, and some of them decided to make their home in the lands of Byzantium. As unwilling hosts, the Byzantines tried all the repertoire of their diplomacy to minimize their danger: military and marriage alliances, sowing of discord, appeals to friendship, empty but resounding titles, conversion to Christianity, duplicity, force bribes, trade, pomp and culture. The success of these devices was varied. They all converted to Christianity but that only insured their allegiance to the Byzantine Church, not to the Emperor. They were dazzled by the splendor and the mystique of the Empire, but that also whetted the ambitions of Krum and Symeon, John I and John II Asen and Stephen Dusan to place the imperial crown on their own heads and even though they failed, their attempt cost the Empire dearly. Nevertheless, on the whole, the long life of Byzantium proves that its diplomatic efforts were not in vain.

The author also discusses two other peoples whose medieval history is likewise linked to Byzantium even though they settled on the northern banks of the Danube. They are Hungarians and the Rumanian Vlachs and Moldavians. Professor Obolensky holds as "almost certain" that the Byzantines were acquainted with the Hungarians since the early sixth century when the latter were settled between the Don and Caucasus; the Byzantines had then an outpost in the Crimea. Moravcsik thinks that the Hungarians must have been one of those Turkish tribes among whom the Byzantine missionaries in that area achieved great success. Obolensky doubts that that was the case because when the Hungarians first appear in history in the ninth century their behaviour is entirely pagan, but he implies that their settlement in the Pannonian Plain late in that century had serious repercussions in Eastern European history because it drove a wedge between Byzantium and the Slavs of Central Europe whom Cyril and Methodius had recently introduced to Byzantine Christianity. This view, however, has to be revised if one accepted Professor Imre Boba's very recent theory that the Moravia of Cyril and Methodius was not situated by Bohemia but around Sirmium, south of the Danube. Be it as it may, the Hungarians' role in Byzantine history is somewhat different from that of the other unwelcomed guests to the realm. Called as allies in 859 against the dangerous designs of Symeon the Bulgarian, they at the same time discovered in the Balkans one

more theater for their depredations but, unlike the Slavs and Bulgars, they never gave signs of intending to stay there. To this fact the author attributes the rather cool reaction of the Byzantines to their raids. Their final place of dwelling, in the Pannonian Plain, put them in the very frontier of Roman and Byzantine Christianity. In spite of the fact that they had been first exposed to the latter, they, nevertheless, chose the former. However, Byzantine Christianity remained a powerful factor in the Hungarian life, and when the conquest of Bulgaria by the Byzantines gave common boundaries to the two nations in question, the religious, cultural and political ties between them became even stronger. The Hungarians were particularly regarded as valuable allies after the dark days of Manzikert and their kings, at least until the end of Manuel I Comnenus' reign, viewed themselves as subordinates to the universal Emperor of Byzantium. The same Manuel, son of a Hungarian princess, and who used the title of *Oungrikos*, frequently intervened in the internal affairs of Hungary and after his last campaign there in 1166 had his suzerainty officially recognized by the Hungarians. The association of the two countries continued and in the fifteenth century, when the Ottomans were readying the death blow for the Empire, the great hope of deliverance was placed on the redoubtable Transylvanian, John Hunyadi.

The Vlachs and the Moldavians do not appear in the Byzantine orbit until the fourteenth century when they attain their independence from Hungary. The author mentions three reasons why they were of importance to the Empire: trade, religious designs on the part of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and military. The second sounds a bit overstated. It was the Vlachs and the Moldavians who first sought adherence to Byzantine Christianity as reaction to the Hungarian attempt to impose on them the Roman type, and the liturgy that they adopted was not the Greek orthodox but the Slavonic. Perhaps this latter decision was due to the influence of Bulgaria from where Professor Obolensky thinks the two Rumanian principalities probably obtained their acquaintance with Byzantine Christianity.

The author adequately documents his facts without excessive use of footnotes. His geographical description of the Balkan area and the maps which he inserts at different intervals of the chapters make more lucid the historical narrative. His judgment of Justinian and the Slav peril, however, may be a little too harsh. Memories of Marathon and Salamis may have been in Justinian's mind when he waged war on Persia, but they do not seem to have been the determining cause of his attention to it to the detriment of the Balkan danger. It must be remembered that the first Persian war during his reign was started by the Persians who broke off the peace negotiations which his ambassadors were conducting in Persia. It is true that he ordered Belisarius, at the same time, to construct a new fortress on the border with Persia,

but that was not necessarily an offensive measure. Likewise, the second Persian war in 540 was started by Chosroes who wanted to get access to the Black Sea and used the Byzantine campaign against Mundhir as a pretext to start the hostilities. Mundhir, to be sure, was a client of Persia, but he had first raided the Empire's lands. All this does not mean that Justinian is entirely free of blame for the eventual Slavic occupation of the Balkan area. The Ostrogothic war was the unrealistic and wasteful realization of a dream which may have prevented him from paying more attention to the Danube frontier. But still, Justinian was willing to make a negotiated peace in 540 with the Ostrogoths, dividing Italy in two; it was Belisarius who frustrated his intentions.

One chronological slip found frequently in chapter 3 is the reference to Louis the Pious as the reigning ruler of Germany in the 860's; the author probably meant Louis the German, since the former had died in 840. But these slips do not detract from the outstanding merits of the work which is an exhaustive treatment of the intricate Byzantine diplomacy with its neighbours in Eastern Europe and in the Caucasus region.

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A Budai Vár és a debreceni csata [The Budai Vár* and the Battle of Debrecen]. By Ignáz Ölvedi. (Budapest: Zrínyi Katonai Kiadó, 1970. Pp. 225. Illus.)

The literature of Hungarian military history has again been enriched. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ending of the Second World War the Zrínyi Military Publishing Co. released *A Budai Vár és a Debreceni Csata* by I. Ölvedi. This book deals with the events of the fall of 1944 in Hungary and is based on material gathered from German, Hungarian and Russian archives.

The book is written against the following background: at the end of August, 1944 Regent Horthy of Hungary dismissed the government led by Sztójay, which was completely under Hitler's influence, and asked Géza Lakatos, the loyal, former general of the First Hungarian Army, to form a new government. General Lakatos took over the direction of the country at a most difficult time. Hungary was under occupation by the German *Wehrmacht*, and on the other side of the Carpathian mountains her army lay bleeding. The Red Army which,

*The Budai Vár was the seat of the Hungarian government in 1944.