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# *Orientalism*, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography

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*Review Essays*  
*Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography*

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K. E. FLEMING

TINTIN, the comic strip Belgian boy detective, has many exciting international adventures. He busts up an opium ring in Egypt, he frees a gorilla from a Scottish castle, he discovers the Yeti in Tibet, he flies to the moon. But even with so fantastic an agenda, only once does he manage to travel to a thoroughly imaginary place. In *King Ottokar's Sceptre*, Tintin finds himself in southeastern Europe in the fictive "Syldavia," next to the similarly invented "Borduria," at war with anarchists, corrupt military police, mustachioed fez-wearing bandits, and all manner of narghile-smoking Balkan buffoons.

The apparent absurd confusion of Balkan history is lampooned in Hergé's faux chronicle of Syldavia, which Tintin eagerly reads as he flies in over the mountains: "In 1275 the people of Syldavia rose against the Bordurians, and in 1277 the revolutionary leader, Baron Almaszout, was proclaimed King. He adopted the title of Ottokar the First, but should not be confused with Premysl Ottokar the First, the duke who became King of Bohemia in the XII century."<sup>1</sup> Even in being introduced to the material, one is intimidated and perplexed. If all of these people have the same name, one might wonder, what's the point in trying to figure out what's going on? Politics, too, is inscrutable. In its contemporary political unrest, Syldavia bears a striking resemblance to another fictional land, "Herzoslovakia," the Balkan homeland of Agatha Christie's villainous Boris Anchoukoff in *The Secret of Chimneys*, a land, by Christie's account, of violence, brigandry, and mystery, a country where the national "hobby" is "assassinating kings and having revolutions."<sup>2</sup>

Syldavia and Herzoslovakia, then, are sort of Balkan "everycountries," composites (both in name and character) based on several assumptions: that Balkan countries are more or less interchangeable with and indistinguishable from one another, that there is a readily identifiable typology of politics and history common throughout the Balkans, that there is such a thing as a Balkan ethnic or racial "type."<sup>3</sup> Yet even as Hergé and Christie assume that they know something fundamental about the Balkans—indeed, that they know the Balkans so well that

<sup>1</sup> Hergé [Georges Remi], *King Ottokar's Sceptre*, Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner, trans. (Boston, 1976), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925; New York, 1975), 105.

<sup>3</sup> A similar observation has recently been made in the case of Eastern Europe. Of Bulgaria, Wallachia, and Hungary, Larry Wolff points out that in many chronicles "the issue of adjacency, by which the neighboring lands of Eastern Europe were associated, was dramatized to suggest a sort of

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