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# Late medieval Southeast Europe between Latin Christianity, Orthodoxy, and Ottoman Islam

Kurseinheit 1

Fakultät für  
**Kultur- und  
Sozialwissen-  
schaften**

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## INTRODUCTION AND COURSE OVERVIEW

This course is intended to provide students with a comprehensive introduction into the entangled and competing histories of the development and transformation of Southeast Europe in the late Middle Ages under the influence of interactions between Latin Christianity, Orthodoxy, and Ottoman Islam. Since these religious identities should actually be perceived as political ones as well, where religion was used as a tool of political homogenization, the course will seek to explain these intricacies and offer an insight into a topic that has recently become increasingly relevant considering the contemporary shifts in global geopolitics. With the rise of extreme ideologies, most of which look to the decontextualized and distorted historical narratives for inspiration and legitimation, it is extremely important to look towards the past in order to understand the mechanisms of human interaction and help us make sense of our own modern obligations to the challenges we are currently faced with.

The described principle is particularly applicable to the case of Southeast Europe, a region that has itself recently experienced bloody conflicts caused by intense political changes, and where historical precedents were used as a key factor in justifying violence. Furthermore, even in times of peace politicians continue to cite examples from previous times in order to mobilize ethnic and national groups with the aim of increasing tensions and achieving their political goals. This is possible because the scientific discipline of history has been forged in the heat of national revival movements during the nineteenth century, and as such has served the purpose of reinforcing and supporting national romantic narratives. Notwithstanding all the progress made in the field of historical study and research in the intervening period, history in Southeast Europe has still remained a powerful tool which is used more often to divide rather than to unite. This can, perhaps, be attributed to the fact that the whole region has been strongly influenced and shaped by the legacy of its past, specifically by its conspicuous and sometimes problematic imperial Ottoman heritage, the effects of which can still be felt today. Since nations and states throughout Southeast Europe came into being and were realized in contrast and antagonism towards the Ottoman Empire, each group created their own specific view of the Ottomans conditioned by discourses that have been constructed and promoted within their respective national historiographies. Therefore, these narratives that are still perpetuated are full of factual inaccuracies, bias, prejudice and ideological interpretation, they do not take into account multiple perspectives and do not thus present a necessary balanced assessment. Moreover, this has meant that the history of Southeast Europe was usually observed as a greater number of smaller individual cases, with no overarching unified and common account of the region's past.

This *Studienbrief* will try to deal with these difficulties by offering basic information and guidance on the key problems and issues regarding the history of Southeast Europe, with a particular focus on the Ottoman conquest, a process that has become paramount to the region's sense of identity. The materials are structured into three complementary units which treat a number of different questions arranged in a thematic manner. The first part engages with the terminology and concepts, sources and interpretations, problems and issues regarding the field of study. Rarely has a topic

been as clouded by unclear and undefined vocabulary, resulting in simplified and confused historical accounts, which in turn ultimately lead to the spreading of wrong and one-sided conclusions about events from the past. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to explain key words and notions at the very outset of this course. Special attention will be placed on outlining the geographic and chronological scope, as well as on defining the quite problematic and multifaceted term of Southeast Europe. The region itself will be presented in all its political, cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity. This segment will also provide a detailed overview of primary diplomatic and narrative sources that exist in a multitude of different languages and forms; a summary outline of historiography through the prism of humanistic discourse, sixteenth century anti-Turkish literature and an analysis of traditional national narratives that stem from it. The *Studienbrief* will attempt to present the complex and intricate dichotomy of perspectives regarding the question of Southeast Europe in the late Middle Ages and the issue of the Ottoman military conquest. Both historiography and public opinion have created two quite distinct ways of framing the topic by contrasting Christianity to Islam, Crusade to Jihad, and ultimately Defeat to Victory. By refusing to take sides, by engaging with historiographical stereotypes and broader historical contextualization, the goal of the course will be to identify ideology and mythology in dealing with the subject matter, and to debate the adequacy of terms such as Ottoman Europe, European Ottomans or Ottoman Europeans.

The second part of the course will give a factual foundation through a survey of key events, personalities and processes that defined the region in the struggle for supremacy over territory and resources. It will focus heavily on the political, military and diplomatic history which is severely underrepresented in accessible works that have been written and published in major world languages. By presenting major regional political actors on the eve of the Ottoman conquest – the Byzantine Empire, Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia – it is going to identify the complex networks of friendships and alliances, enmities and feuds, as structural principles on which the society of medieval Southeast Europe was based on. Then it will introduce the competing religious concepts of heresy, Orthodoxy and Latin Christianity, as well as conflicting interests of Hungary and Venice in the region. After that, the focus will shift on the political, military and cultural rise of the Ottoman Turks and the initial Western responses to Ottoman Expansion, before moving onto treating the concrete armed clashes, diplomatic alliances and attempts to achieve some respite from the advancing Ottoman armies. The complexity of the factual reconstruction will be somewhat reduced, so as not to overburden the narrative with a multitude of difficult names, places and events that would impair the understanding of overall historical processes and the most important structural features.

The third segment of the *Studienbrief* will focus on the progressive and continuous transformation of Southeast Europe under the influence of Ottoman and Islamic civilization, through an analysis of effects of war and violence – such as slavery, destruction and demographic changes – but also concentrating on the outcomes of cultural contacts, economic exchange and artistic influences which contributed to the reshaping of urban space in Southeast Europe, leaving a particularly strong impression on both the monumental and common architecture of the region. The transformation was also expressed through the implementation of Ottoman institutions, such as, for instance, the *sharia* law, *timar* land tenure system, *devsirme*, and *waqf* – the pious endowment that

stood at the centre of many building and urban projects in Ottoman Southeast Europe. But, perhaps, the most striking feature of the Ottoman conquest was the spreading of Islam. Long debated and discussed, the analysis of this issue has resulted in various different interpretations. Therefore, the final segment will be dedicated to showing how Christian churches functioned in the Islamic religious space of the Ottoman Empire, how the *dervishes*, *tekkes* and *mosques* impacted the spiritual landscape of the region, why some Christians in the region chose to convert to Islam and how the others managed to preserve their religious affiliation which in later times came to define their national identity.

Thus organized, this course will ensure the construction of a knowledge framework which will enable the easier comprehension of political, military, social, cultural and religious processes that helped to shape Southeast Europe throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth century. It will also provide students with a better awareness of the intensity of interactions, conflicts, rivalries and mutual tensions between Latin Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Ottoman Islam at the very end of the Middle Ages. In that way they will be acquainted with a topic that exceeds national, regional and even continental borders; a topic that also implies analytical engagement with modern discourses on “contested space”, “historical legitimization strategies” and various diverse spatial, political and ideological concepts of Europe. Hopefully, the course will eventually lead to critical reflection and allow the students to constructively participate in meaningful, productive and scientifically objective discussions on the history of a quickly evolving World.

Finally, just to give a few practical remarks about the structure of the course, and more importantly about the literature and references that will be appearing throughout the *Studienbrief*. The course is organized in such a way as to present the basic information and most pertinent questions regarding the history of late medieval Southeast Europe. It will direct the progress of the course in an orderly fashion, but will not seek to be thorough or exhaustive in its portrayal of certain extensive or complicated issues. Therefore, in order to compensate for this, at the end of each segment there will be a short comment regarding the relevant literature in which more about the topic can be read. The cited books and articles will be clearly distinguished between those exclusively written in German or English and marked out as **bold and underlined** in writing. The contents of these texts are highly recommended for any potential examination taken within this course as a part of its completion. The other quoted works constitute optional reading materials which are suggested for further consultation. Most of them have been written in diverse languages and their primary intention is to enhance the specialist understanding of any given topic that has been treated or mentioned in the duration of the course.

Most titles from both categories should be easily available in electronic editions online. Aside from that, shorter or longer excerpts from sources will appear intermittently throughout the *Studienbrief* and their purpose will not only be to serve as written testimony that backs up the overall historical narrative, but also to allow students to independently practice working with primary source materials, differentiating between source and interpretation. The text of the *Studienbrief* will also be accompanied, wherever appropriate, with illustrative materials depicting various personalities, places or events. Special care has been taken to provide as many historical maps as possible,

but it is nevertheless suggested that students consult an atlas whenever they feel necessary to do so as it will allow them to better understand historical processes.

## I TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTS

### 1. Defining space and time:

#### Where is Southeast Europe and how long did the late Middle Ages last there?

The unifying and fundamental topic of this course will be the southeastern part of Europe during the late Middle Ages. As the geographical extent of this region is still a matter of some controversy and has been subject of both academic and unscholarly debate, it is vital to delineate its dimensions and borders, positioning it within the broader geographic and political context of Europe. The same goes for defining the vague timeframe hidden behind the generic term “late medieval” or “late Middle Ages”, since processes which characterized this period did not begin nor end everywhere at the same time. Here we will try to address these issues in order to make it easier to follow the rest of the course.



Image 1. Physical map of Southeast Europe (treehouse-maps.com)