Yugoslavia, as a sovereign state, was a purely twentieth-century phenomenon. However, the manner in which its constituent peoples emerged from imperial rule during the nineteenth century had a great influence on the course of Yugoslav history after 1918. This process drew strength from the past, particularly the histories of medieval statehood which were resurrected in this period to give legitimacy to the notion of South Slav identity as a distinct cultural and political entity. The primary motivation of South Slavs during the nineteenth century was to achieve and preserve a measure of autonomy if not always independence from powerful imperialist states. Such endeavours were necessarily defined by recourse to the language of national self-consciousness, precisely because European political discourse following the late eighteenth century revolutions determined that the coincidence of nation and state was the measure of political legitimacy. By demonstrating the existence of a nation, so the tribes of south-eastern Europe might also persuade the great powers to acknowledge their right to self-governance. Nationalism was therefore a means of achieving leverage over the strong by appealing to the very foundations from which European statehood drew its strength.

The most dominant elements in the nineteenth-century struggle of the South Slavs to attain recognition of distinct identity in the form of autonomy or independence had traditions of statehood which predated their submergence in the empires which dominated the region after the fourteenth century. Both the Croats and the Serbs had coalesced as medieval kingdoms around specific institutions and experienced sovereignty in their own right. Subsequently, the traditions and symbolism as well as the history of independence were carried in the institutions which survived their conquest; the Assembly, or Sabor and the office of governor or Ban in the case of Croatia; the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church for the Serbs. As for the other elements which composed Yugoslavia, Slovene national consciousness was acquired during the nineteenth century, and those of the Macedonians, the Montenegrins,
the Muslims of Bosnia-Hercegovina developed during the twentieth century as outgrowths of the South Slavic affinities.¹

The South Slavs began arriving in the peninsula from the sixth century and acquired tribal identities which formed the basis for subsequent political organisation. These peoples were habitually migrant and their identities in this period were not closely tied to territory. The medieval model for political organisation in south-east Europe was that of loosely structured multi-ethnic empire, rather than a centralised state with strong nationalist identities. Both the Holy Roman Empire and that of Byzantium fitted this model. Communities defined their identity by religious affiliation and dialect; the political power of the church remained supreme until the evolution of native state structure in the nineteenth century.

During the early modern period, these great empires overlapped in what we know now as Bosnia-Hercegovina and Macedonia. The intermingling of communities speaking a variety of dialects derived from Slavic tongues and written variously in the Latin or Cyrillic scripts, as well as the cohabitation of a range of religious practices, from those of the Judaeo–Christian tradition to the Islamic faith, were features of this region. Despite the periodic changes in their imperial masters as the armies of the Ottoman Turks vied with those of the Habsburg dynasty for conquest and security, these communities thrived in the harsh mountainous terrain without inter-communal strife. The militaristic and authoritarian dynasties which exercised a hegemony over them, offered protection in return for quiescence. This then was the *modus vivendi* in the Balkans for almost five hundred years.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Balkan peninsula was educationally and economically the most backward of the European lands. Communications systems were primitive, the vast majority of the population was illiterate and disenfranchised. When, in the early nineteenth century, European nationalism permeated the region, it interacted with these tribal loyalties and feudal traditions to create aspirations and expectations which rivalled those of the great nationalist movements of the Germans, French and Italians, only without the social basis which made the building of cohesive states composed of multiple identities viable. The South Slavs lacked comparable economic and social foundations and were less able, therefore, to generate strong leadership with sufficient legitimacy to forge modern states on the European model. Instead, they produced societies divided within themselves, dependent upon authoritarian practices to achieve stable governance in