FEATURED REVIEW


The Routledge History of East Central Europe since 1700 is a multi-authored textbook which introduces the state-of-the-art in the multifaceted historiography of modern East Central Europe without aiming to impose a single coherent perspective. The volume conceives of East Central Europe in rather broad and flexible terms: in the editors’ own words, East Central Europe lacks fixed boundaries, but it contains both “Central Europe” and “Southeastern Europe” (p. 8). The volume consists of a brief introduction and ten long chapters, eight of which are thematic and cover the modern era since approximately 1700. The remaining two chapters are essentially chronological and somewhat narrower, focusing on the period of communism and its legacy and the post-89 years and ambiguous process of Europeanization, respectively.

The altogether twenty-one contributors cover mainstream topics in the political, socioeconomic and cultural history of East Central Europe, while also devoting significant attention to several newer scholarly subjects, such as gender, territoriality, migration, and commemorations. The book begins with an exploration of the momentous territorial changes in East Central Europe in modern times and the overarching shifts among its various “regimes of territoriality.” Drawing on Charles S. Maier in particular, the insightful overview penned by James Koranyi and Bernhard Struck plead for a conceptualization of the 1860s and the 1960s as the two key caesuras in the reorganization of political space. In their interpretation, the 1860s meant a shift from imperial rule over multiethnic spaces to attempts to “right-size” the nation through new infrastructures and territorial control. The 1960s brought the beginnings of a still ongoing global opening, in which territoriality no longer appears to be at the forefront of politics.

Koranyi and Struck combine an interest in high-level and local-level politics to provide a crisp narrative of how, by the nineteenth century, the epicenter of geopolitical struggles had shifted from the northern part of the region to the south, and how the map of the region was settled. They perceive stark continuities in the defining ideas, territorial ambitions, and homogenization projects which were characteristic of the region from the 1860s until the post-World War II
period, while also fully acknowledging the novelty of imposing well-policed borders after World War I. While the two authors do not question that Nazi and Soviet policies fundamentally reshaped East Central European societies, they view these imperial projects as a drastic acceleration of preexisting trends, rather than as ruptures. They subsequently note that the practice of redrawing ethnic boundaries and spaces seems to have largely petered out by the 1960s, sourly adding that this has to do with the fact that the brutal process of “right-sizing the nation” had basically been completed by then. Koranyi and Struck could have devoted more attention to the varied conceptualizations of the region across time (beyond the period to which they aptly refer as the rise of Eastern Europe), their narrative nonetheless remains a theoretically informed and richly detailed overview which amounts to a seminal contribution to the volume.

While recurrently drawing on the cases of Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Bulgaria for examples, Krassimira Daskalova and Susan Zimmermann’s chapter on women’s and gender history similarly belongs among the highlights of the volume. Viewing gender as a primary way of signifying power relations which intersects with questions of class, religion, and the nation, the two authors emphasize that East Central European gender history has tended to be marginalized within both gender history and studies on East Central Europe. Their ambition is therefore to reveal several fruitful ways in which a gender-conscious history of this multifaceted region could help further reinterpretations of dominant paradigms in both of these larger fields.

Their clearly structured and nuanced chapter examines primarily the history of women’s lives, status, and experience to highlight historically changing gender norms and social practices in six major realms: education; work and social politics; law and citizenship; empire, nation, ethnicity; gendered scripts of sexualities and intimate relationships; and women’s activism and movements. Particularly noteworthy are Daskalova and Zimmermann’s depictions of the mixed blessings for women brought by the introduction of the modern legal system and, later, the socialist state. They show, for instance, that contrary to mainstream (and gender-biased) narratives on the rise of modern equality, the nineteenth century made the legal differences between men and women more pronounced. The authors subsequently show how, during the period of state socialism, formal equality was combined with persistent practices of gender difference. They argue that, on the one hand, socialist regimes did more than West European states to abolish the legal subordination of women, and state socialist education policies in particular greatly improved the latter’s social
standing and opportunities. On the other hand, the enormous and forceful mobilization of women into the world of paid labor produced largely segregated and stratified labor markets, while the gendered division of care-taking remained widely ignored. In addition to the fact that it is complex and balanced, another key strength of the chapter is that it highlights several possibilities for further research. Daskalova and Zimmermann plead in particular for the need for more entangled histories across macro-regions, which would simultaneously recognize and explore the major effects material scarcity had on East Central Europe.

The single chapter of the volume devoted entirely to cultural history focuses on the creation of literary cultures, broadly conceived. In other words, it aims to connect the production of cultural representations to social and political currents. Irina Livezeanu, Thomas Ort, and Alex Drace-Francis trace various movements, networks, and schools of thought, while highlighting the often underestimated connections among intellectuals within the region. The three coauthors assert that under communism, literary and cultural life achieved unique social and political relevance. They argue that this was the culmination of earlier trends, the origins of which can be traced all the way back to the absolutist experiments of the eighteenth century and the various attempts to rethink the relationship between government and the citizenry since then.

The three coauthors show early on that, contrary to the assertions typically found in national narratives, language-building and print development went hand in hand with projects to consolidate imperial rule and standardize public education. They subsequently sketch how, at the time of the rise of modernism, the cultural life of East Central Europe still remained less differentiated and more holistic than some of the “major cultures” further west. As Livezeanu, Ort, and Drace-Francis perceptively explain, the interwar period brought more militant and ideologically-driven intellectual and artistic agendas and, therefore, sharper polarization, but also much more of nationalization. Moreover, the coauthors focus on the wartime cultural transformation that facilitated the postwar revolutions. Their treatment of the postwar period strikes a balance between the tragic cases of individual intellectuals and the unprecedented availability and accessibility of high culture. Its erudite *longue durée* explorations and emphasis on the postwar relevance of literary culture make this one of the paramount contributions to a volume in which cultural history is rarely given detailed attention and several chapters arguably treat the postwar period a bit hastily.

Patrice M. Dabrowski and Stefan Troebst, for instance, trace the uses and abuses of history from the eighteenth century to 1989. They offer numerous
valuable insights, especially into the rather hesitant Ottoman and the rather drastic post-Ottoman politics of history. While their perspective is broad and the number of cases analyzed impressive, Dabrowski and Troebst slightly underplay the communist experience in order to buttress their claim that the long nineteenth century, the interwar period, and World War II were all of greater relevance in determining the new-old patterns of remembrance since 1989.

Similarly, Ulf Brunnbauer and Paul Hanebrink are interested in the successes and failures of a broad variety of political visions and ideologies, but they cover only visions and ideologies of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. They offer an excellent brief survey of major trends in political-ideological thinking on a regional scale, covering the liberals, the left, the agrarians, and the right in an equally balanced manner (even if, understandably for such a short narrative, the depth of coverage cannot match that found in the new A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe). However, Brunnbauer and Hanebrink end rather abruptly with the communist takeover, leaving the reader somewhat perplexed about what they refer to as the stubborn persistence of certain key political ideas, despite the massive subsequent transformations.

The chapter entitled “Communism and Its Legacy” provides ample compensation for these choices. In this chapter, Malgorzata Fidelis and Irina Gigova explore four themes, namely state-building and nation-building, social relations, East-West interactions, and the decline and fall of communism. Viewing the departure from the limiting totalitarian framework of omnipresent state control and the new interest in everyday life as welcome developments in scholarship, the authors are interested primarily in new scholarship that complements or directly challenges previous scholarly and popular understandings of the epoch and its impact. Highlighting that the study of communism remains very much a work in progress, Fidelis and Gigova provide brief overviews of several of the most fruitful avenues for new research. These avenues include the continuities across 1945, which may help contextualize and explain the rise of Stalinism; state-society negotiations under communist regimes; new forms of leisure and consumption; the experiences of and meanings attached to socialist spaces; East–West entanglements; and, last but not least, how East Central Europeans imagined the West during the Cold War. This is a perceptive, up-to-date overview of English-language publications, even if the exclusive focus
on the latter and the neglect of studies on the Soviet Union constitute notable self-imposed limitations.

Joel Brady and Edin Hajdarpasic’s chapter on religion and ethnicity examines how the legitimating power of religion, ethnic solidarities, and nationalism interacted across different periods and regimes in East Central Europe. Approaching recent discussions of ethno-religious fusion and the ascendance of secularism in a rather critical manner, the authors develop an intriguing anti-teleological narrative with a marked focus on the Ottoman and post-Ottoman history of Southeastern Europe. Their main aim seems to be to challenge the rather popular millet-to-nation narrative. Brady and Hajdarpasic explain first that historians who emphasize the millet concept tend to overstate the systematic aspects of religious differentiation in Ottoman societies. Brady and Hajdarpasic continue by underlining that Muslim–Christian confessional distinctions, ambiguities, and antagonisms may have already been profoundly transformed by the violence of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but that the toppling of Ottoman structures also produced deep divisions and exacerbated older ones within Orthodox Christianity. At the same time, several attempts were made even in later times to bridge the Christian–Muslim divide (most notably, the successful Albanian one and the much less successful South Slavic one). These are all valuable insights, which add up to a convincing reinterpretation of the relationship between religion and ethnicity in modern Southeast Europe. The chapter is both sketchier concerning the countries further north and rather brief and somewhat unspecific with regards to what it calls the “complex alignment of conservative, nationalist, and fascist forces with Christian religious organizations” in the first half of the twentieth century (p.198) and what it introduces as the complex relationship “between socialist states, religious institutions, and nationalist currents during the Cold War” (p.200).

Bogdan Murgescu and Jacek Kochanowicz’s chapter on the economic history of the region poses an implicit challenge to most of the other chapters in this volume and to much of what qualifies as mainstream today, more generally. Eager to suggest sharp dichotomies, Murgescu and Kochanowicz assert that the economic underdevelopment of East Central Europe compared to the West (its persistent backwardness, as they insist) has been all too real. In their sobering though fairly old-fashioned overview of economic development, Murgescu and Kochanowicz assert that the project of catching up with the Western core has been centrally important in modern times, but has remained basically unaccomplished, despite what the authors present as the continuous and unidirectional import of
ideas, institutions, investment, and innovation from the West. Without analyzing entanglements with the Western core in a more complex fashion, they explain that East Central European history has been characterized by overly sharp discontinuities, so that, some fluctuations notwithstanding, wealth, knowledge, expertise, and practices could not be sufficiently accumulated.

Reinhard Heinisch’s political science contribution on party politics and the European Union is arguably even more at odds with the agenda and general tenor of the rest of the volume. Whereas the rise of “Europragmatism” traced by Heinisch may indeed be viewed as a seminal process of recent years, the author’s somewhat homogenizing perspective on a highly diverse region and his strong reliance on simple survey results make this a less than fully satisfying addition. In my assessment, less or more would both have yielded better results; the process of Europeanization might well have merited more attention on the longue durée too, and the history of the post-89 transition period could already have been discussed in a more encompassing fashion. Last but not least, the chapter on demography and population movements explores demographic and economic pressures, as well as the increasing roles of the state and violence in population movements. Theodora Dragostinova and David Gerlach focus on key developments in migration history, such as the shift from imperial mixing to national “unmixing,” from routine and seasonal to sustained and long-distance migration, and from the Cold War-era restrictions to the most recent patterns.

In sum, The Routledge History of East Central Europe since 1700 strikes an admirable balance not only between the many diverse areas it covers, but (partly through the strategic pairings of authors) also between the two, traditionally separately treated macro-regions it studies under the label “East Central Europe.” At the same time, the volume devotes limited sustained attention to more peripheral regions, including the recently much discussed borderlands. More crucially for a textbook of this kind, the volume achieves a fine balance between historical facts and narrative, on the one hand, and historiographical analysis and reflection, on the other. The themes chosen are large, important, and diverse enough that, with the single and only partial exception of the post-89 chapter, no individual choice appears questionable. Although the coverage is thus fairly representative, the emphasis which is put on some issues and questions in the volume (along with the failure to place emphasis on some other issues and questions) may nonetheless be viewed more critically. Despite the remarks on the key importance of social and cultural history made in the introduction, the volume contains no summary of social transformations and, as noted above,
only one of the chapters focuses on cultural history. Other major themes, such as the transformation of state institutions and the recently much discussed roles of wars and violence, are recurrently hinted at rather than substantially discussed. Last but not least, most of the chapters make limited attempts to contextualize East Central European trends in broader continental or global frameworks. Even so, the volume manages to convey and reflect on several of the dominant historiographic trends and key research findings in the English-language scholarship of recent decades, and it presents a rich, thoughtful, and accessible new history of a highly complex region over three centuries.

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