
The volume surveys eight national contexts from East Central and Southeastern Europe in an attempt to reconstruct the defining features of the contemporary politics of the past. As the authors suggest, falling short of the hopes and expectations of many in the aforementioned two regions, instead of a process of democratizing the narratives about the past, there is a return to or rather no change in the dominance of nation-centered narratives. This diagnosis strikes the often rather disillusioned and pessimistic tone of the volume. The introduction by editor Oto Luthar identifies a veritable watershed in the politics of history in 2010, after which serious breaches of professional standards have occurred within the respective countries. However, this periodization is explicitly reflected upon only by some of the contributors.

Most chapters discuss state socialist politics of history and historical narratives before delving into more recent developments. The new or recurrent narratives analyzed in the various chapters embrace the equation between Nazism and Communism and refuse any investigation of broader societal participation in the most infamous episodes of the past century. It is suggested that such currents are initiated from within the scholarly field (Luthar, p.8). While this is a defensible position, it can be usefully complemented by a focus on all those engaging in the discourse from the margins of scholarship or well beyond its realm, most notably, the prime makers of politics of the past, the so-called memory brokers. Though Of Dragons and Evil Spirits is a fairly coherent edited volume, the foci of the chapters oscillate between national memory brokers and academia-bound debates, politics of history pertaining to specific episodes of national history or the battles over establishing the grand narrative of the nation after the collapse of state socialism. Therefore, in the following I will pinpoint several shared topics to highlight the comparative potentials of the volume.

Some of the authors find it important to reflect on the lustration laws in their respective countries, suggesting that an investigation into their qualities and functioning (or often mere existence) is essential to an understanding of politics of history in a broader sense. Daniela Koleva underlines not only the specific features but also the modest institutional effect that these laws had in Bulgaria.
Šačir Filandra is quite disillusioned with the lack of Bosnian lustration laws and explains their absence by pointing to “post-independence chaos.”

As for the narrative aspects of this new politics of history, all of the authors in the volume claim that an opportunity for the thorough pluralization of historical discourses emerged with the respective regime changes, but this moment has passed. The practically monophonic national canons hardly allow for self-reflection, and their instrumentalization to serve the purposes of politics of the past result in “memorial militancy” (Koleva), which uses selective negationism (Michael Shafir) as a key discursive strategy. In the Croatian case, some sort of pluralization is mentioned, though as Ljiljana Radonić argues, this does not really help further a more critical assessment of the nation’s past. In the Hungarian and Croatian cases, Jewish suffering during the Holocaust serves as shorthand for the rhetorical practice of subsuming different victim groups under the same category (i.e. victims of World War II) and downplaying societal involvement. Although the concept of collective and competitive victimhood has been established primarily in relation to the post-Yugoslav societies, which have been subjected to a form of transnational justice, as Shafir demonstrates in particular, its analytical virtues can be applied to the interpretation of East Central European cases as well. (Shafir’s notion of competitive martyrdom has considerable overlaps with that of C. A. Nielsen, “Collective and Competitive Victimhood as Identity in the Former Yugoslavia,” in Understanding the Age of Transnational Justice: Crimes, Courts, Commissions and Chronicling, ed. Nancy Adler [2018].)

The European dimensions of the politics of history are tacitly present in all of the chapters but are discussed in greater detail only in the contributions by Daniela Koleva and Ferenc Laczó. The former calls attention to the lack of integration of communist experience into common European remembrance after the entry of post-communist countries into the European Union. Laczó does not fully share her view, as he claims that both radical left-wing and right-wing actors’ responsibility for equally serious crimes has been acknowledged to a certain extent. EU conditionality regarding the establishment of consensual remembrance is discussed by both authors. While Bulgaria was a notable exception to this condition, Laczó claims that for the Hungarian public, EU accession amounted to another missed opportunity for engagement and reconciliation.

Although visual representations of the past constitute one of the most often scrutinized aspects of the politics of history, this volume focuses more on narratives and agendas. There are sporadic utterances though, regarding
both public spaces and exhibitions. Radonić briefly discusses how Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader (2003–2009) ordered the removal of controversial memorials, and Koleva underscores the importance of local initiatives in Bulgaria, where a comprehensive museum of communism has yet to have been built. At the same time, Todor Kuljić describes competition, i.e. an ever-changing hierarchy among ethnic groups that make similarly exclusive claims to the remembrance of “their” victims at the expense of others.

Although the introduction sets a clear agenda for the volume, some degree of divergence in terms of approaches and style remains inevitable; the authors tend to share a conceptual framework which enables the reader to perceive the texts as directly comparable. Of Dragons and Evil Spirits as a whole has the virtue of addressing some time-specific aspects of contemporary politics of history. Scholars and policy makers may learn important lessons from the cases presented. However, only time will tell whether the authors have truly managed to capture the starting points of a new politics of history.

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