

Book Review: From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe by John Connelly

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Connelly, John. *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020. x + 956; maps; ill.; appendices; index; hardback, \$35.00.

John Connelly, professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley, whose areas of specialization include both East Central Europe and nationalism, has published an up-to-date, well-written, massive work that flows effortlessly. Although lengthy, Connelly does a first-rate job with his herculean volume. It is divided into five major sections: 1) The Emergence of National Movements; 2) The Decline of Empire and the Rise of Modern Politics; 3) Independent Eastern Europe; 4) Eastern Europe as Part of the Nazi and Soviet Empires; and 5) From Communism to Illiberalism. Included in these units are twenty-six chapters, some of which are further subdivided. In addition, each chapter contains a nice summary. Unlike most books on this subject, Connelly does not include Albania and Greece.

Prior to 1989, many referred to the region as Eastern Europe and considered it on the periphery or the crossroads of the continent. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the term East Central Europe became fashionable and is now seen as part of the West; the author, however, uses both terms interchangeably. However, this is not an encyclopedic survey of the region's quite complex and difficult history. This area is not a monolith or a mere intersection of culture. It is impossible to characterize it in general terms as one or more exceptions constantly emerge. Connelly notes that it is much like Africa today, where borders are not set on language, religion or ethnicity. He compares it to Grand Central Station, where peoples (Slavs, Jews, Germans, Islamic converts, and others) and ideas have constantly moved about for centuries.

Prior to the late 1700s, Eastern Europe seemed stable with various peoples living relatively harmoniously with one another. When Habsburg Emperor Joseph II introduced German in an attempt to unify, centralize, and modernize his state, much like Britain or France,

he unknowingly unleashed nationalism. Many peoples in the empire believed they were being allocated to the “trash bin of history” thereby disappearing, and thus, in a general reaction, they began “awakening” nationally. Meanwhile, the Polish nobility and illiterate, peasant Serbs kept alive memories of their fallen states and heroes giving later nationalists fodder for resurrecting them. These events started the peoples of East Central Europe down the road to becoming nations. These peoples or emerging nations would alter the map of Europe in three waves: first, the 1878 Congress of Berlin that saw the independence of the Balkan states; then the 1919 peace conference ending the First World War replaced fallen empires; and lastly, the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Czechoslovak “Velvet Divorce” in the 1990s. For over two centuries, ethnic nationalism grew to become the dominating factor in the politics and culture of this European region. It became common for a national group to blame their problems on another ethnicity. As a result, this small space on the globe experienced more of the traumatic events of the twentieth century than anywhere else on the planet. Today, it is a place where the first, second, and third worlds meet, overlap, and persevere.

While going into detail about these processes, Connelly also dispels some common misconceptions about Eastern Europe such as the Habsburg Empire was destined to fall, fascism was rampant in the interwar period, Hitler planned to destroy Poland and Yugoslavia along with Czechoslovakia, and the Soviets long had a master plan to turn the area communist after the war. He also notes the similarities between various eras, for example, the fall of communism and the Revolutions of 1848, both of which were preceded by poor economic times resulting in a general reaction against stagnant regimes.

Naturally, in a volume this size, some issues are found. With about one hundred pages of notes, some of which explain the text more fully, a bibliography is omitted causing one to search

at times for full citations. The index is cursory, while some subjects are not located on the pages noted. For example, the Slovak priest and later wartime president of Slovakia Jozef Tiso is not found on pages 414, 438, 477, 499, 876, and 902, while his first name is spelled Josef on page 819, but he is not listed in index for this page. Other inconsistencies include calling the American Richard Holbrooke a “flawed diplomat” (p. 760), while thirty-five pages later Holbrooke is now a “savvy diplomat.” There are also some misspellings like “Marsaryk” (p. 852) for Masaryk, “Waraw” Pact (p. 710), and “Robert” Frucht (p. 900) when this scholar’s first name is Richard.

Nonetheless, these are minor trifles and do not detract from the text. The author consulted and noted primary sources, ageless classics, and standard and contemporary works, many in the vernacular, as well as using personal experiences and internet sources for Eastern Europe as well as for nationalism. He also acknowledged the aid of a bevy of current well-known international scholars in the field to create the best well-rounded and in-depth view of East Central Europe.

Unfortunately, today, the region is still an underappreciated part of the world. It is too often forgotten or ignored rather than being seen as a dynamic, integral part of the global community with numerous rich and diverse histories and cultures. Rather than be just a bit inquisitive, many people just shrug when looking at Eastern Europe, and continue to echo the words of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain from the 1938 Munich Crisis when he portrayed Czechoslovakia (East Central Europe) as “faraway lands of which we know nothing.” Connelly’s work will do much to rectify this injustice. It is an excellent contribution to past and present overviews of the area. It will appeal to scholars, students, and lay people who will discover the richness of the region. It will remain a staple source for years to come and should become a classic, often-cited text.

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