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This book is about the modern history of Eastern Europe: it starts in earnest in 1800, though basic information and considerations of the previous periods are also provided, and ends with Viktor Orbán, as a trademark of contemporary populism and illiberalism in the region. According to the author, Eastern Europe, sometimes in the book referred interchangeably as Central Eastern Europe, is geographically everything between contemporary Germany in the west, what was the Soviet Union in the east, the Baltic Sea in the north, and Albania and Greece in the south. East Germany, an entity under the Soviet rule during the Cold War is, for political reasons, considered in the book as a part of the region.

One of the main points of the book is about the strength, intensity, and resilience of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe. The main explanation and up to a point justification for its intensity provided by the author is that nations in this part of the world have been for centuries concerned about their very existence, threatened either by assimilation, meaning predominantly loss of the national language as the main trait of national identity, or by extermination. As the author points out “During the worst days of World War II, few worried that the Dutch, French or Russian peoples would become extinct. Yet this fear was very much alive among Serbs, Poles, Czechs, and East European Jews” (p. 24). For good reasons, the reader could add.

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Nationalism in Eastern Europe has been a fuel of the struggle of its peoples for survival. The nation state has been the answer, so it has been the aim of this struggle. The general attitude was that only after national liberation and after securing the existence of the ethnic nation, can other liberation be successfully pursued. For example, social injustices were considered to exist due to the oppression of the foreigners and their empires. In short, all development in domestic and international politics, economy and social sphere have been “overshadowed by the fear of becoming *foreign in their own land*, traitors to their heritage. East Europeans are accused of being obsessed with the past, but that is because they have wanted to break from it” (p. 26, italics in the original).

Accordingly, the author suggests that the history of Eastern Europe is dominated by the battle for its peoples’ survival in the harsh environment of the much bigger, empire prone nations, whose empires dominated the region for so long. In 1800 there was only four states in the Eastern Europe, all of them multinational empires: Prussian, Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires.¹ The author points out that the map of Eastern Europe in 1800 was like the map of Africa in 1900: borders arbitrarily drawn by the colonial empires irrespective of the ethnic, national, or tribal borders that had existed. Hence fragmentation of the empires in both Eastern Europe and Africa was inevitable with the advent and strengthening of national identity, though Eastern Europe has been more successful in that process than Africa. If the national identity was not strong enough, then the nation-building projects were doomed from the start, as the author points out that “Some of the nations imagined by intellectuals never took root; Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were just two cases” (p. 21).

The author specifies that “This book ascribes no stereotypes to Eastern Europe beyond saying that it is an anti-imperial space of small peoples. In the corners of its political nightmares dwells this indistinct fear of being absorbed into larger powers. The anti-imperial struggle kept ethnic cultures alive, but it also promoted ideologies of exclusion that can become racist” (p. 24–25). Though it is understandable that these are just two sides of the same coin, the reader is a bit sceptical about the author’s claim that one of the empires, Austria-Hungary, protected human rights better than many nation-states the come later. It seems that the author confuses legal state (*Rechtsstaat*) with protection of human rights. Yes, the government in Austria-Hungary was constrained by the law (after all, Gavrilo Princip was not sentenced to

¹ It was Prussia, Austria and Russia who wiped Poland off map a few years earlier (in 1795), and they agreed to “abolish everything which could revive the memory of the existence of the Kingdom of Poland” (p. 22).

death for the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand because he was legally underage), but these laws did not necessarily protect human rights, especially those of the Slavonic peoples in the Monarchy.²

The crucial country for the region, according to the author, proved to be Germany, especially the question how Germans would form a nation-state after the Holy Roman Empire become defunct in 1806. The answer to this question has shaped the region's fortunes and, especially, misfortunes. It was Otto von Bismarck's strategic decision to leave Austrian Germans out of the unification that proved to be crucial for the future. However prudent this decision was regarding the organisation of the united Germany, the Second Reich,³ it produced a frustration and grievance among ethnic Germans who were not included in it, predominantly Austrian and Bohemian Germans. The border between Germany and Austria, between the same ethnic nation, was so frustrating for the lower customs clerk in the small Austrian border town of Braunau am Inn, a father of a young boy. The boy's name was Adolf Hitler.⁴

² This nostalgic view of the Habsburg empire has gained a foothold in the recent years. For example, Judson (2016) provides a comprehensive, but rather rosy and unbalanced picture of the empire as an enlightening force that brought civilisation to its peoples. Basically, this contribution is a review of all the moral arguments of colonial expansion, in the which the metropolis is doing it for the benefit of the people in the colony whose civilisation is underdeveloped. This is not to say that in some specific cases, for example in the case of the occupation of the previously Ottoman Bosnia & Herzegovina, the advent of the Habsburg empire did not meant progress for the society. Evidence based chapters of Ivo Andrić's *Bridge on Drina* on the Austrian occupation of Višegrad, the city in which the bridge is located, provide vivid illustration of that progress.

³ The author provides some rationale for this strategic decision. The religious and cultural heterogeneity of the united nation was not increased, the dominant position of Protestant Prussia was not endangered, and the Hapsburg dynasty was removed as the challenger to the throne of the Reich. Furthermore, German Austria was engaged in the task of expanding German cultural and not only cultural influence in Southeast Europe. As to the heterogeneity argument, some people in Serbia even today regret that King Alexander I was not as prudent as Bismarck.

⁴ For years Germany's post-war political elite downplayed its own responsibility for the advent of National Socialism and the Nazi state, underlining that Hitler was Austrian. The anecdote is that during the first meeting between Germany's prime minister (Konrad Adenauer) and his Austrian counterpart (Julius Raab) after Austria regained its independence, following the signing of the Austrian State Treaty in 1955, Adenauer ostensibly remarked that, after all, Hitler had been Austrian. His Austrian guest ostensibly replied. "Yes, he was. But in Austria he had been a house painter, it was when he went to Germany that he became Chancellor". Of course, Hitler was never a house painter, that is propaganda driven myth; he was, prior to his political career, just an ungifted and failed artist (Hamann 1999).

It was Germany's decision to write a blank cheque to Austria-Hungary in 1914 and its decision to declare war on Russia and invade France, violating the neutrality of Belgium, which kicked off the Great War and the demise of the Habsburg Monarchy as a result of it, that made possible the advent of some new nation states in Eastern Europe and resurrection of others. It was Germany's decision to start World War II and, later, invade Soviet Union, that led to the gruesome death of so many people in Eastern Europe, virtual extermination of the Jews in the region, and eventually paved the way for the total regional control by the Soviet Union, emergence of the Soviet empire during the Cold War, and the thorough bolshevisation of the region.

Interesting is the idea suggested by the author about long 20th rather than long 19th century, at least for Eastern Europe. The idea, attributed to Hobsbaum (1995), is that there was a long 19th century that started in 1789 with the French Revolution and ended in 1914, with the beginning of the Great War. Subsequent is the short 20th century, which started in 1914 and ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1991.⁵ Hobsbaum's rationale for the notion of the short 20th century is that this is the time of extremism, with two world wars and two totalitarian movements (fascist and communist), and that with the demise of the latter the time of extremism disappeared. Contrary to this rather unconvincing point of view,⁶ the author suggests that at least for Eastern Europe there is a long 20th century, which starts with the Berlin Congress in 1878, which produced first fully fledged independent nation states in Eastern Europe, carved out from the Ottoman Empire, triggering the process of political fragmentation in the region and that the long 20th century is still not concluded—obviously the author considers that the process of fragmentation and creation new nations in Eastern Europe has not been completed. It is true that no other region, as the author points out, has witnessed so frequent, radical, and

⁵ For Fukuyama (1992) this was not only the end of the 20th century but rather the end of history: victory of free market capitalism and liberal democracy. Well, history went on: at the beginning of the 21st century, one of the most powerful countries in the world is based on state capitalism and autocracy. And liberal democracy is not something that is thoroughly spread throughout the world, even with the small clubs of the European Union.

⁶ Irrespective of whether such a historiographic timeline division, based only on the criterion of political extremism, is justified, it is obvious, although with hindsight, that there has been no demise of extremism, as Islamic extremism, which existed well before 1991, assumed the leading role in early 21st century. Perhaps 11 September 2001, at the very beginning of 21st century, can be symbolically taken as the beginning of the new age of (Islamic) extremism.

violent changing of borders in the past century or so, but it is the open end of the long 20th century in Eastern Europe that puzzles historians and casts a sinister shadow over the region.

For the author, the two ethnic nations in Eastern Europe that distinguished themselves from the rest are the Serbs and the Poles. The reasons for this are presented in the chapter with the telling title “Insurgent Nationalism”. The list of differences between the two ethnic nations is long and substantial, starting with their confessions and ending with the literacy rates, at least in the past. Nonetheless, what is more important is what binds them together. “Serbs and Poles [...] passionately promoted their national causes, and although some did so through scholarship, the most effective, dramatic, and widespread method was military. Tens of thousands of Serbs and Poles took up arms beginning in the late eighteenth century in efforts to throw off foreign rule. This reflects a political impulse: the conviction that nations not only had to build language and culture but also must seize territory and create independent statehood” (p. 130).

The author claims that many Serbs and Poles were nationally conscious before the dawn of modern nationhood. This claim, the author is aware, challenge the idea that mass national consciousness had to wait for modernisation, in particular the advent of print culture, but also the modern roads and infrastructure that supposedly make a modern nation possible among people who were strangers, the agents of empires.

The insurgent nationalism of both ethnic nations is explained in the book in details, especially the role of the church in it, which has given a messianic flavour to the insurgency. Both the Serbs and the Poles gained their nation states through substantial casualties, with military victories and defeats, but almost every time against a more powerful enemy. They were not right every time, nonetheless they paid handsomely for every mistake they made. The author points out that “The traditions of insurgent nationalism explain why, in 1939 and 1941, the Polish and Serb governments were backed massively by their respective populations, across deep political divides, when they decided to defy German power, against which there was no chance of success, at least not in rational terms. Struggle, more often in defeat than in victory, had made them who they were” (p. 153). Through the book there is a substantial understanding for the position of peoples and nations in Eastern Europe, even justification for some of their political or military moves, perhaps some sympathy for some of them in certain situations, but the admiration is reserved only for two: the Serbs and the Poles.

Special attention has been paid in the book to 1918/1919. For good reason. As the author points out, what revolutionaries in Eastern Europe failed in 1848, they succeeded in 1918/1919. And much more, the reader would comment. Not only were the nation states created after the collapse of the empires, but a radical social revolution took place on the fringe of Eastern Europe, with one unsuccessful spin-off in the region (Hungary). The challenges to the new nation-states were enormous, with substantial Bolshevik influence in the region, bellicose Germany, and substantial ethnic minorities in almost all the countries. The economies of the nation states of Eastern Europe were not performing well, and the level of economic development, save Czechoslovakia, was far below that of Western Europe. Part of the reasons for the poor economic performance of the new nation states was precisely because they were independent now. A beneficial effect of empires is that they provide the framework of free trade, large internal markets, boost division of labour, i.e. specialisation, and provide the grounds for materialisation of economy of scale. All that produces increased productivity and enhanced economic efficiency. With the empires gone, those benefits were missing. Well, that was the price of being independent.⁷

The two multinational states struggled with this diversity from the very beginning. As pointed out by the author “What is astounding is how quickly the recognition dawned that the new ‘Yugoslav’ and ‘Czechoslovak’ peoples were semi-fictions” (p. 343). Obviously, much more is needed to build a nation than the idea of well-wishing intellectuals.⁸ The author rightly emphasises the huge ethnic/cultural heterogeneity of the South Slavs, now united in their own independent state. Perhaps that can explain the failure of the Yugoslavia project, with its two distinctive but equally unsuccessful stages—(politically) nothing worked.

An interesting notion is presented in the book about the differences in the political stability of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia between the world wars.⁹ It was the Czechs in the first case and the Serbs in the other that were the *spiritus movens* of the unification and creation of the democratic

⁷ Lal (2004) provides a list of economic arguments in favour of empires.

⁸ Careful reading of this book could bring immense benefit to the Western political elite and decision makers in obtaining the answer to why their massive nation building programs throughout the world have mainly failed. Especially considering that it was indigenous, domestic intellectuals that supported both the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak ideas, not remote academics and decision makers on another continent, obsessed, for whatever reason, with some bold ideas.

⁹ “Yugoslavia” stands as the name for the country in this review, although in the first period after the unification (1918–1929) the official name of the country was The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

centralized nation-state, whether republic (in the case of Czechoslovakia), or monarchy (in the case of Yugoslavia). In the former case, although Slovakian preferences were for a federal arrangement, the Slovakian political elite was not strong enough, because of a lack of vibrant political public life in Slovakia under the Kingdom of Hungary, as the constituent of Austria-Hungary, and because of that it was not up to the task to bring forward the federalisation agenda to the debate.

Contrary to that political constellation, in the latter case, the author explains, Serbs met a formidable political adversary. The Croat political elite of the time was well developed, as a brisk political public life existed prior to the unification, and it was able to effectively formulate its political stance. “The elections of 1919 produced stunning majorities in Croatia for the Croat Peasant Party, led by the mercurial, charismatic, popular, and erratic but principled Stjepan Radić, who decided to boycott the meetings that drafted the new state’s constitution” (p. 377). The Serb political elite at the time was rather fragmented, fighting each other as they did for decades when Serbia was an independent kingdom. Even after Radić’s death in 1928 (he was assassinated in the parliament by another deputy), the Croat political elite was strong enough and determined to pursue its own goals. There was exactly a political balance and contest of the equal that created instability in Yugoslavia between the Serbs and the Croats, tilting the balance in the last years before World War II towards the Croats.

It is not only these two countries that experienced ethnic/cultural heterogeneity and the trade-off regarding territorial expansion, whatever the motivation. Post-1918 Poland’s strategy was expansion to the east, even fighting a war with the Soviets for the eastern borders and winning it, for bringing if not all, then as many Poles as possible into the territories under the auspices of the nation state. But that successful expansion to the east brought in many other ethnic nations (Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanian, and Jews) into Poland in substantial numbers. In terms of economic theory (Alesina, Spolaore 2003), with the increase in size of the nation, there is economy of scale in production of public goods, meaning that the government is more efficient in fulfilling its duties (like national defence, or law and order), but there is also increased ethnic heterogeneity, meaning different preferences of the people regarding public goods (due to the heterogeneity), which stoke political conflicts and undermine the trust between the peoples and mutual confidence. From the review of domestic political life between the world wars, provided in the book, Poland paid a hefty political price for overexpansion to the east.

During World War II Eastern Europe was perhaps the worst place in the world in human history (Kershaw 2015). The reasons are obvious: it was the place of the Holocaust and other forms of genocide. It was a place of massive human suffering and casualties. Again, it was Germany's role that was pivotal for Eastern Europe. It was the German political elite at the time that decided that the final solution to the Jewish Question would take place in Eastern Europe (Browning 2004).¹⁰ It was the German political elite's decision to attack the Soviet Union, as part of the of the *Lebensraum* creation project that, after several tens of millions of dead, brought the Red Army to Berlin, as well as the new historical stage for Eastern Europe—its bolshevisation, against the will of most of the people in the region.

The new age started with massive ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe, primely of Germans who were on the wrong side of the new borders, those along the Oder and Neisse rivers. None remained to the east of these rivers. Poland's territory was moved around 300 kilometres to the west, together with the Polish population.¹¹ Massive reshaping of Eastern Europe was carried out along the ethnic lines in the form of ethnic cleansing, though Marxist doctrine predicted that nations would cease to exist, as workers have no fatherland. Nationality not only came back with a vengeance, but also with massive violations of basic human rights.

There was no dilemma that Moscow was in charge, but there were uprisings in Eastern Europe almost from the very beginning of the Soviet rule. Whatever the specific discontents were, they almost always surfaced along national lines. A possible exemption was Yugoslavia, the country which its ruler Josip Broz Tito turned into what the author labels a miniature Hapsburg empire, whose nations bonded together with the official ideology of "brotherhood and unity", which was enforced without any of the Austro-Hungarian subtlety. Though the author suggests that Yugoslav split with

¹⁰ The final solution was a German project, but some Eastern European nations provided thorough support and demonstrated deadly entrepreneurship. It was the Croats and the Slovaks in their newly independent states, given to them by Nazi Germany, who were the champions of this policy.

¹¹ The demographic story of city of Lwów (Lemberg in the Habsburg empire) is telling. Before World War II, the city was in Poland, with Poles comprising 50% and 32% Jews of its population, according to the 1931 census. After World War II, the city was in the Soviet Union (Soviet Ukraine), most of Poles who were not killed were expelled to cities like Breslau/Wroclaw in the newly acquired territories in the west and most of the Jews were killed at the nearby Belzec extermination camp. Joint share of Jews and Poles in Lwów was less than 10%, according to the 1959 census, the first one after the war (Risch, 2011). By the end of the century, there were virtually no Poles and Jews in the city.

Moscow in 1948 was along national, i.e. patriotic lines, it seems more like clashes of personalities of the autocrats and their ambitions to extend their own control.

Although the most prominent rebellions were in 1956 in Hungary and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia, which were crushed by Soviet armed forces, it was the Poles' sustainable effort to preserve national identity and to run the country by themselves that was the most bitter pill to swallow in Moscow, especially taking into account the centuries of troublesome relations between the two nations. Events of the recent past caused the Poles the most visible scares: Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland (subsequently renamed Western Ukraine), along the lines of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the Katyn massacre, and idleness of the Red Army during the deadly Warsaw Uprising in 1944. It was the Catholic Church in Poland that was the fulcrum for all national identity preservation efforts. One episode of the many disclosed in the book is compelling: building of church in Nowa Hutta, a new communist industrial town—a showcase of the success of the new order. After years of struggle, the church was eventually built. In charge of that endeavour, on behalf of the Church, was a young deputy bishop. His name was—Karol Wojtyła.

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 came as a surprise to well-paid Kremlinologists,¹² but it was the result of a lengthy process of sustainable social erosion. As the author points out “The collapse of 1989 grew out of a social and economic crisis that had been building for decades, yielding a malaise that reached deep into the Communist Party. For Communist regimes, faith was crucial. [...] Yet by the 1980s, Communism had become a church where people not only forgot their prayers but also scoffed at basic teachings— finding them hypocritical, fictitious, damaging, and irrelevant” (p. 685).

The gradual sapping of faith in communism in Eastern Europe, however strong that faith was at any time, is unquestionable, but it seems that the author downplays the crucial change that enabled that collapse was the weakening of Moscow's grip on the region. That development did not come as a good will but as the consequence of the Soviet Union's predominantly economic failure, which prevented the country to keep up in the Cold War. Mikhail Gorbachev only acknowledged this failure. The collateral

¹² Not only to them. It was György Konrád, a Hungarian writer and dissident, who in the early 1980s concluded that “The Soviet empire, despite all of its internal difficulties, is in good shape, not headed towards collapse” (p. 707).

convenience of his Glasnost political doctrine was letting loose the chains controlling Eastern Europe. Once that happened, the process of escaping the Soviet Empire was irreversible.

A long chapter is dedicated to the break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars of its succession. The chapter offers wide coverage in terms of facts and data, but rather dubious in terms of context and interpretation of what happened. Some of the author's interpretations and explanations look like the press coverage at the wars at the time, rather superficial and biased, with a political agenda, and with an obsession to produce a Manichean divide into good guys and villains. This is hardly serious historiography. Just as an example of this approach, the reader learns that the main reason for the US/NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 is that "US secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that the United States would not tolerate further acts of ethnic cleansing. Herself of Czech background, Albright was determined that neither Bosnia nor Munich would be repeated" (p. 760). To use a British sarcasm for a comment—if you believe that, you will believe anything. A cynical reader could even go one step forward and suggest the opposite reasoning. With her Czech background, Albright had full understanding for the Serbs' concern (like Czechs') of the expanding ethnic Albanian minority (like the Sudeten Germans) in Kosovo (like Bohemia) with support of the neighbouring country (like the Third Reich), which led to the separation of the region from the country (like the Munich Agreement). This reasoning is equally implausible as the one suggested in the book.

The author goes one step forward and suggests that in dealing with Western powers about Kosovo Slobodan Milošević was "perhaps 'learning' from Hitler's triumph at Munich" (p. 761). Be that as it may, the significant difference that made this insight absurd is that Hitler's military might at that moment was substantial, at least when compared to Great Britain and France, and that was the main incentive for them to accept the agreement. Milošević's military might was negligible compared to the Western powers. That disproportion was demonstrated in the war that followed shortly, in which the US Air Force did what it has been doing for decades and what it is good at: bombing the adversary into submission. This time without casualties on the US side.

The book ends with the Eastern Europe joining the European Union, in something that many, especially in Western Europe, considered the end of (European) history and the final victory in the Cold War. Nonetheless, illiberal democracy started to flourish in Eastern Europe, with autocratic leaders claiming that they are just protecting their nations from the foreign

empire, a new type of it—this time based in the Brussels. They are just riding the familiar wave. Old ideas die hard. Nationalism in Eastern Europe is alive and well, the reader concludes.

This book is the results of a huge historiographical effort. After various short histories focused to specific areas of the region (Kaplan 1993; Malcolm 1995; Malcom 1998), which had been written with a substantial political agenda and the ambition to influence political decision processes in the West, this is a long history of Eastern Europe written without any political agenda, and apparently only with honourable academic motives.

Nonetheless, most of the book, especially period prior to the 20th century, is about listing facts, rather than historiography. The reader is overwhelmed with detailed facts about Eastern Europe, its specific peoples and regions, its languages, and national champions and political leaders. The author produces ample data, but not that many interpretations and causalities. It can be a challenge for the impatient reader to drop the book or to skip a large number of chapters and go straight to the final one with, hopefully, some conclusions. Accordingly, the book requires an active and tenacious reader, who will, in most cases, process all the data with their own analysis, and compensate the lack of it in the book.

This book is rather poor in the economic history segment of Eastern Europe. The author provides some data, mainly for the Soviet period, nonetheless, without understanding the meaning of the data and that what is important for economic analysis is relative indicators (for example, the share of the country's foreign debt in its GDP), rather than absolute one (the amount of the debt in some currency, say USD). Economic analysis of other periods is almost entirely missing. The author's enthusiasm for the Soviet's early economic results, failing to realise that the outcome is only due to ruthless involuntary mobilisation of resources, demonstrates his poor understanding of the mechanisms of allocation of resources and the concept of economic efficiency.

Many potential readers will be discouraged from reading this book due to its scale, i.e. number of pages. They should not be. The book is very readable, and the author provides a lot of food for thoughts. It is up to the reader to make the most of it.

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