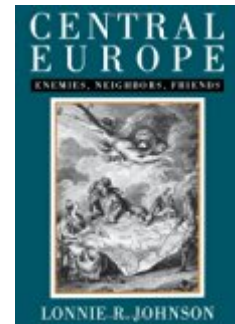


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lonnie Johnson. *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xi + 339 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510071-6.

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Published on HABSBURG (June, 1997)



## The Myths and Memories We Teach By

Since 1989 a growing number of scholars have entered a dialogue about the meaning and future of the area that stretches from Latvia to Greece. For political scientists this may have been more difficult a transition at the beginning, so entrenched were many of the categories set up during the Cold War, but these specialists in what now has become “transitology” have been able to re-frame and rename the area in a flexible fashion, on the basis of their specific thematic focus. The same cannot be said of historians, who along with their readers have been readily aware of the political stakes of framing the historical narratives of this “Area Formerly Known as Eastern Europe,” if I may venture my own terminology. Nonetheless, a number of historians have made progress in opening up more textured and theoretically informed ways of examining historical processes in this region. Maria Todorova’s work on the Balkans has focused on deconstructing this notion, emphasizing the significance of discourse in the cultural, political and economic practices associated with this area. [1] Milica Bakic-Hayden has proposed using a post-colonial analysis to examine the competing definitions and stakes invested in constructing the notion of East versus West on the European continent.[2] Larry Wolff has produced an analysis of Eastern Europe as a notion used during the Enlightenment to define the idea of the nation and of public sphere in Western Europe.[3]

Lonnie Johnson’s *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends* brings a new dimension to this growing literature that seeks to reconceptualize Eastern Europe in a historiographically more meaningful manner.[4] He defines his work as a survey “designed to introduce read-

ers to the histories of Central Europe’s kaleidoscope of peoples” (p. v). In under 300 pages the author moves between years 400 and 1996 to provide a better understanding of how Central Europe has changed over time, both as a politically and culturally meaningful area and as a much contested notion. In this sense, labeling his work as a “survey” may be misleading. For those awaiting a good textbook for teaching undergraduate courses in the history of this area Johnson’s book seems inadequate. The author does not provide a historical narrative that would focus on the succession of developments in order to bring out continuities and changes over a long period of time. Furthermore, his choice of important issues helps to frame his narrative around political and diplomatic developments, devoting space to cultural and social issues only episodically. However, Johnson openly acknowledges the limitations in his approach from the first page of his preface, pointing out that his work was consciously built as a selective analysis, focusing on “a few key issues or events important to understanding [each] period addressed” (p. v).

His introduction seeks to define Central Europe as a historically distinctive and meaningful notion. To the author’s credit, from the very first pages he delves into discussions about the different stakes historians, politicians, and intellectuals have had in the different definitions of Central Europe. His analysis of these competing notions sensitizes the reader from the very beginning to the richness and ambiguity of the way in which the past of this region has been used to bolster different claims about the present (p. 5). This is where Johnson’s book makes its

most important and novel contribution to the writing of a survey on this area. Furthermore, the author does not privilege one interpretation over any other, focusing instead on the context of each construction of the notion of Central Europe as it speaks more about the cultural and political outlook of those who uphold that particular view than about the “correctness” of that view. In this sense, the book is successful in introducing the possibility of multiple, conflicting narratives coexisting and enriching, rather than confusing, the overall picture of what Central Europe is and how its past is meaningful. While such texts with a postmodern outlook are often inaccessible to an audience of non-specialists, Johnson is able to overcome this obstacle, as his prose is both clear and colorful.

The author’s own definition of “Central Europe” as separate from Western, Eastern and Southeastern Europe is based on five criteria. First, the relationship between religion and culture in this area is distinct, as Roman Catholicism has continuously blended with a sense of belonging to Western civilization, while Eastern Orthodoxy has had an eastward cultural orientation towards Byzantium and Moscow. Johnson chooses as his second criterion the political frontiers of the medieval period, since they “correspond to a great extent to the religious frontiers” (p. 4). He identifies multinational empires as the third and the conflict between Western Christendom and the Ottoman Turks as the fourth criterion. Finally, the growing gap between Central and Western European patterns of modernization constitutes the fifth criterion. These five categories seem inconsistent, since some are descriptive while others are analytical. While the relationship between religion and culture can constitute a category of analysis, the political frontiers during the Medieval period are a characteristic specific to a certain time, rather than a criterion for examining a geographic area over time.

Johnson’s uncritical framing of Central Europe’s development as “retarded” by comparison with Western Europe is a clear indication of his own intellectual grounding and mental location, which takes the West as the norm and the rest of Europe, be it Central, Eastern, or Southeastern, as lagging behind in terms of economic development. One of his central questions is “Why did Central Europe fall behind and stay there?” (p. 5). Thus, while he attempts to provide competing views of Central Europe’s past with intellectual dispassion, his evaluations betray the belief in a privileged interpretation—that the development of the West was somehow objectively ahead of that of Central Europe. This inconsistency be-

tween Johnson’s claims and his position throughout the book diminishes the value of this survey. The reader unacquainted with the historiography of this area will very likely be captivated by the plurality of competing stories and historiographic interpretations presented along the way, and will likely trust Johnson because of his thus demonstrated intellectual dispassion. The book is more likely to reinforce certain already politically charged clichés about this area, rather than seek to problematize them, as Johnson claims to be doing on page vi of his preface.

In spite of this fundamental unexamined bias, Johnson’s narrative does provide some provocative discussions about the shifting definitions and meaning of Central Europe. During the Early Medieval Period (400-1000 A.D.) the area seems to be defined primarily through the developments in the realm of religious institutions and conflicts. Johnson takes the split between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism and the subsequent incorporation of most Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire as the foundation for distinguishing Central from (South) Eastern Europe. In this chapter he provides several “flash-forwards” that illustrate well the various ways in which events and symbols from this period have been successively recast by various intellectuals and historians in order to support different claims to legitimacy. His description of the shifting locations and meanings of the Crown of St. Steven in Hungarian historiography and politics is particularly poignant in illustrating this point (p. 20).

Chapters Two and Three follow the development of the feudal states in Central Europe until the Reformation. The author’s periodization relegates the Renaissance to a small subsection of his discussion on the “Great Medieval Kingdoms.” Of greater significance for the development of this area is the close relationship between religious fervor, political ambition, and dynastic diplomacy, especially in the case of the Habsburgs. By the end of this section, Central Europe becomes closely identified with the image of “bulwark of Christendom” against the Islamic Ottomans. Johnson takes the reader continuously into the future, showing how this metaphor has been appropriated over time by Hitler, Matyas Rakosi and other political leaders to legitimize their actions (p. 82). Although this discussion illustrates well the ambiguity and power of such historical metaphors, it could have been made more meaningful if the author had discussed whether the metaphor was indeed successful in rallying the support of Rakosi or Hitler’s followers.

Chapters Five through Seven follow the rise of the Habsburgs as the dominant Central European power first through this state's successful Counter-Reformation strategies and subsequently through its policies of Enlightened Absolutism. Chapter Seven contains an interesting comparison between the Habsburg and Prussian takes on rational rule and autocratic government. The author makes incursions into the future again, this time of a more sinister nature. The section on Prussia is entitled "Frederick the Great and Prussian Pathology" and builds a case for a causal relationship between the willingness of the German subjects to "acquiesce to the authority of the state ... as an overriding moral and rational obligation" and the rise to power of the Nazis (pp. 111-115). This assessment seems crude at best, disregarding the complex developments in Central European history between the eighteenth and twentieth century in the realm of mentalities alone, which preclude any such simple associations between these two eras. These connections reveal themselves to be even more problematic in Chapter Ten, where Johnson discusses the Third Reich itself.

Starting in Chapter Seven, nationalism becomes one of the driving forces in the conflicts in this region and the very definitions of Central Europe's shape and identity. Chapters Eight and Nine continue this strand of analysis, following also the rise of Germany at the expense of the Austrian Empire as the paramount power in the region. The discussion of the 1848 revolutions and German unification underlines the ways in which the nationalist cultural discourse and conflicting aspirations of the various ethnic groups weakened liberalism as a force for political, economic and social change in Central Europe.

The fragmentation of the area after W.W.I according to the Wilsonian principles of self-determination and national sovereignty sets the stage for what Johnson considers as a radical reconfiguration of Central Europe. No longer defined according to religious criteria as the bulwark of Christendom, this area becomes redefined as the land between West and East – first between Germany and the Soviet Union and subsequently between the Cold War superpower blocs. Chapters Ten and Eleven discuss the successful bids first of Nazi Germany and, after Yalta, of the Soviet Union in reshaping the meaning of this area as vital region for their respective political and economic interests. Chapter Ten offers a brief yet poignant discussion on the various schools of thought regarding Hitler's rise to power and the impact of these differences on interpretations of the Holocaust. Johnson underlines the generational and political differences that fueled these histo-

riographic debates, resisting an easy judgment of either and pointing out instead the shortcomings of both the Sonderweg and Hitler as aberrational camps (pp. 204-07).

In the discussion of Central Europe's role in shaping and being reconstructed by the Cold War, Johnson provides again an insightful short discussion of how scholarship on the Cold War has been strongly influenced by political stakes and how changing diplomatic, economic and internal policy priorities divorced from Central Europe's own problems prompted shifts in U.S. and Western European attitudes towards this area from containment to detente. The discussion avoids easy indictments of the U.S. policies in light of the end of the Cold War, yet does not make apologies for the U.S. either.

The unraveling of the Soviet bloc's apparent unity and the developments in the area since 1989 make the subject of the last two chapters, which investigate the new attempts at reconstituting Central Europe as a meaningful region apart from its ties to the Soviet Union or its opposition to it. The author follows the development of reform and dissidence movements in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968, 1977), and Poland (1980-81) and ties them together through their effect of reinforcing the Westward cultural orientation of these peoples. This section offers what I consider one of the most precise short discussions of the "Gorbachev factor" in Eastern Europe. Johnson contrasts the popularity of the Soviet leader in the West with the suspicion with which he was received by in the East, especially dissident leaders, and offers an effective critique of Western scholars and politicians' inability to understand this attitude (pp. 269-74).

Overall, this very ambitious project suffers from the weaknesses imposed by its scope (almost 1600 years of history) and length. However, it would be unfair to evaluate it outside of the parameters set by the author at the outset. As a survey intended for an audience of educated non-specialists, the book offers many insightful discussions on the role of religion, nationalism, and great power diplomatic struggles in shaping not only the development of Central Europe, but also the very meaning of its past and, hence, its changing identity. Yet, in spite of his claims of exploring these conflicting stories with intellectual dispassion, Johnson still operates from a standpoint he considers privileged – that of the more developed, democratic liberal West. The effects of this uncritical position range from statements such as "[y]ounger people in the region want to lead *normal* Western lives" (p. 297, my emphasis) to defining the rise of authoritarian regimes in Central Europe as a function of the area's eco-

conomic backwardness or lack of modernization (pp. 198-199).

In his preface, Johnson speaks self-assuredly about his ability to avoid “traditional biases that creep in when Central Europeans write about themselves or one another” (p. vi). Yet, he seems unable or unwilling to identify the biases and clichés that drive his own point of view. Statements such as the following evaluation of communist rule in the GDR are not likely to dispel any preconceived ideas of an audience of non-specialists:

The GDR was one of the most successful Communist states in the eastern bloc, not because it was Communist, but because it was “German” in the negative sense of the word. Piety, Prussian organizational logic, Nazism and Stalinism were compatible in many respects (p. 241).

It is troubling to see piety and “Prussian organizational logic” essentialized as fundamental and *negative* German traits. Such generalizing evaluations are unlikely to foster a more critical, textured understanding of major notions presented here, such as Nazism and Stalinism. The book also contains a series of inaccuracies and inconsistencies which could be easily corrected, such as identifying Bukovina as part of Southern Poland and later referring to it as Austrian Bukovina.

Lonnie Johnson’s *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends* provides some useful departures for restructuring the narrative of this region’s past in terms of driving themes and enriching the meaning of events by presenting multiple, often competing historiographic analyses. Yet, the book suffers from important shortcomings which

might not be apparent to an audience of non-specialists, but will hopefully be addressed by future surveys of this area.

Notes:

[1]. Maria Todorova, “The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994).

[2]. Milica Bakic-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995). (Starting from the Fall 1994 issue, *Slavic Review* is available on line and can be reached by way of the Habsburg home page or directly through the URL: <<http://ragnar.econ.uiuc.edu/~slavrev/upenn/winter95/milica.html>>.

[3]. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994). (Two reviews of this book were posted on HABSBURG and are archived on the HABSBURG Gopher at <<gopher://gopher.ttu.edu:70/11/Pubs/lijp/Books>>.

[4]. Some of the more recent such textbooks are E. Garrison Walters, *The Other Europe* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), Philip Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), and Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom* (New York: Routledge: 1992), a book that Johnson praises.

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**Citation:** Maria Bucur. Review of Johnson, Lonnie, *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

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