

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Peter F. Sugar. *Nationality and Society in Habsburg and Ottoman Europe*. Aldershot, Great Britain and Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1997. x + 286 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86078-629-0.

Reviewed by T. Mills Kelly (Grinnell College)  
Published on HABSBUURG (June, 1998)



## The Last East European?

Already Eastern Europe is fading from our sight, replaced by the new categories of post-Communist geography. In place of that part of the world we could so conveniently lump into one region, we now have Central Europe, East Central Europe, Southeastern Europe, and even the “near abroad,” each with its own peculiar and often controversial implications.[1] But for an entire generation of scholars and students, “the lands between” were simply and uncontroversially Eastern Europe. The small but talented and influential group of historians who after 1945 devoted their careers to this region saw it as at once a part of Europe *and* a place all its own. Now, these leading figures in our field are retiring, but fortunately for us they are not just leaving behind an extensive body of scholarly work. We can also thank them for the many excellent scholars who were once their graduate students.

Among the most influential of these scholars is Peter F. Sugar. How many of us, for instance, have assigned (or have been assigned) one of his works in our courses? When we write about the role of nationalism between the 1840s and the 1940s, who among us can say we did not consult one of Sugar’s works early in our project? His “External and Domestic Roots of Eastern European Nationalism”[2] remains one of the standard introductions to the topic, and the multi-volume *History of East Central Europe* (edited by Sugar and Donald Treadgold) is an indispensable foundation of any library collection.

And yet, as important as Sugar’s work has been, it would be almost impossible today for a scholar at the be-

ginning of his or her career to choose as Sugar did at the outset of his own “to write less than I possibly could have and edit instead collective volumes with the help of experts to produce the basic literature which I found was lacking...I know a little of every aspect of the history of my region, but am not truly a specialist of a specific kind of history or a given country or nation...I worked more as a generalist than a specialists, having written about every century from the 14th to the 20th” (p. vii).

Despite his self-deprecation, Sugar writes with authority about every part of the region. Throughout his career, he has been confident enough in his powers to build upon the work of others rather than feeling constrained to present new archival research to his readers. Such synthetic works of larger scope are now few and far between, and are almost exclusively the province of the late career historian. If one of the essays reproduced in this collection were submitted for publication today, it does not take too much imagination to picture an external reviewer writing dismissively in the margin, “I see no evidence of primary research!” Fortunately for us, Sugar began writing when it was still possible to be a generalist.

Many of the ten essays included in this volume will be familiar to Sugar’s readers. Whether they are concerned with more general questions such as the roots of nationalism in the region or the impact of modernization, or with specific questions such as the influence of the Enlightenment in eighteenth century Hungary or the influence of economic considerations on Romanian diplomacy after the Congress of Berlin, several themes echo

throughout.[3] The first of these is that even though Eastern Europe was and is different from Central and Western Europe, it is nonetheless *Europe*. Matters developed differently in Vienna, Prague, Krakow, Bucharest, or Belgrade than they did in Paris, London, Frankfurt or Amsterdam for a whole host of reasons, but Sugar rejects an exceptionalist argument that places this region outside the stream of West or Central European events. Instead, as these essays attest, his career has been built upon demonstrating just how much a part of Europe Eastern Europe is.

A second theme that surfaces again and again in these essays is how important an understanding of nationalism is for anyone who wants to make sense of the history of this region. The peculiar conditions of Eastern Europe meant that national movements took on a greater importance not only in politics, but also in every other sphere of life. In his consideration of the importance of nationalism, Sugar confronts his own “k.u.k.,” Kann and Kohn.[4] As happy as he is to build on the work of these two men, Sugar does not accept them as gospel. For example, he rejects the argument of both Kann and Kohn that after 1848 the Habsburg Monarchy was all but doomed. Instead, he argues that the failures of 1848, while important, were not final, and that many of the conditions necessary for turning the Monarchy into a *Gesamtstaat* remained after 1848. Sugar contends that it was possible for reformers in the empire to accept both nationalism and a supra-national framework until late in the nineteenth century (Section III, pp. 94-96). This point, made by the author in 1967 in the justly famous third volume of the *Austrian History Yearbook*, has begun to take on new importance in recent works that emphasize the successes of the Monarchy in creating a modern state, rather than focusing on the causes of its collapse.[5]

A final larger theme, prominent in all but a few of the essays, is the central role of religion in all aspects of life in Eastern Europe. Here again we see a distinction drawn between Eastern Europe and the rest of Europe, but not so sharply that Eastern Europe becomes wholly different. The Ottoman state made religion the organizing principle of its society, but north of the Ottoman borders religious questions were almost as controlling. Examples cited by Sugar in this collection include the Czech insistence on interpreting the legacy of White Mountain in religious terms well into the twentieth century, divisions in eighteenth and nineteenth century Hungarian politics between the Protestant and Catholic nobility, or the role of various churchmen in nationalist movements across the region.[6]

These arguments are presented in ten different essays concerned almost entirely with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, five of which deal with the Habsburg Monarchy, four with the Ottoman lands, and one a more general essay on nationalism. Because the first essay included in this volume appeared in 1958 and the last in 1991, the reader can see Sugar’s career and his mastery of his subject unfold. Although one could wish that he had chosen to correct some of the more obvious typographical errors that appeared in the original versions of these pieces, the Variorum series, of which this volume is a part, simply reproduces facsimiles of the original articles. One could also wish that Sugar had chosen to include some of his essays on twentieth century developments, but even with these omissions this volume will be a welcome addition to almost any library. It is unfortunate that its \$85 price makes it far too expensive for students.

The essays in this volume may seem to reiterate what has become the standard view of Eastern Europe among scholars of the region. They depict the region as a place where nationalism and religion mattered more than in Central or Western Europe. They stress how the nobility of Eastern Europe retained its influence longer than elsewhere on the continent, while modernization in general came later. Yet if this vision seems commonplace to today’s student, we have Peter Sugar to thank for it.

#### Notes

[1]. “Eastern Europe” has not been entirely abandoned as an organizing concept. See, for example, Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* (New York: Routledge, 1998), soon to be reviewed on HABSBUrg. Naming the regions between Russia and Germany/Austria also generated a lively discussion on HABSBUrg in December, 1997.

[2]. Originally published in *Nationalism in Eastern Europe*, eds. Peter F. Sugar and Ivo Lederer (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 3-54 and reprinted in this collection of Sugar’s essays as Section IV.

[3]. Originally published in the *Journal of Central European Affairs* 17, 1958, pp. 331-55 as “The Influence of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Hungary” and in *Wirtschafts- und Kulturbeziehungen zwischen dem Donau- und dem Balkanraum seit dem Wiener Kongress*, Graz, 1991, pp. 91-100 as “Economic Considerations for Political Decisions in Romania, 1878-1883.”

[4]. The historians Robert A. Kann and Hans Kohn. "Societies under Habsburg Rule."

[5]. See, for example, Gary B. Cohen, *Education and Middle-Class Society in Imperial Austria 1848-1918* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996).

[6]. Originally published in the *Slavic Review* 22, 1963, pp. 1-30, as "The Nature of the non-Germanic So-

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBURG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu> and <habsburg@ttacs6.ttu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** T. Mills Kelly. Review of Sugar, Peter F., *Nationality and Society in Habsburg and Ottoman Europe*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2134>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).