

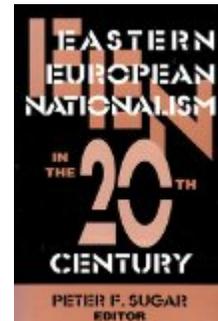
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Peter F. Sugar, ed. *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*. Lanham, Md.: American University Press, 1995. 456 pp. \$38.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-879383-40-1; \$74.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-879383-39-5.

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Since the break-up of the USSR and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, “nationalism” has become the favorite explanation of events in Eastern Europe (and in many other parts of the world). Likewise, the Eastern European nation-states, which were barely known to most of the American public, have suddenly emerged as very important (or at least troublesome) places. The public’s interest in Eastern Europe has grown especially since the United States has become involved militarily in the former Yugoslavia.

Unfortunately, the media’s attention to nationalism in Eastern Europe has not, it seems to me, significantly educated the public. It is precisely to the interested but confused public that this book is addressed. Editor Peter Sugar states on the first page of his introduction that the book is not intended for experts but for “those who would like to know why the people of this region behave as they do since gaining their independence, and why nationalism has replaced communism as the major force dictating their behavior” (p.1). Although the book might not be intended for “experts,” even they could benefit from a reading of these essays.

The book consists of eight essays, each one addressing a particular nation, as well as an introduction and conclusion written by the editor. One of the most interesting features of this book, and one that would make it especially useful in the classroom, is that each essay is prefaced by four or five primary sources. These documents allow the people (or at least nationalists) from each of the nations of Eastern Europe to “speak for themselves” (p.2). The documents are meant to illustrate the state of the nationalist enterprise during four periods: Pre-World War I, the Interwar era, and the Communist

and Post-Communist periods. One of nationalism’s dominant features has been its defensive character. Every one of the eight nations examined in this book has felt itself to be under attack from external or internal enemies or usually both. These fears frequently became self-fulfilling prophecies as nations adopted hostile attitudes to their neighbors and national minorities.

In the book’s introduction, Sugar explains his choice of periodization and the focus of the essays. The book concentrates on the twentieth century, he says, because to expand the chronological scope of the essays would have made the book too long and unwieldy. Additionally, the twentieth century witnessed the triumph of the national idea in Eastern Europe and it is thus only appropriate that it is the focus.

The other function of the introduction is to provide a brief overview of the history of Eastern Europe as well as a discussion of nationalism itself. Sugar, in keeping with much of the current theoretical work on nationalism, argues that national identity is constructed or manufactured rather than being transcendent or biologically inherent in the individual. The historical survey traces the development of each of the nationalities covered in the book up through World War I. Both the chronological and theoretical overviews which Sugar provides in the introduction are extremely important, especially considering the intended audience, because many of the essays assume some basic background knowledge of Eastern Europe and theories of nationalism.

The essays which follow the introduction appear in alphabetical order. Thus, Bernd Fischer’s essay on Albanian nationalism appears first. Fischer focuses on the tremendous difficulties which have occurred dur-

ing the course of the construction of Albanian nationalism. These difficulties he attributes to the extremely fragmented nature of traditional Albanian society. The historic divisions have been religious, linguistic (between the Gheg and Tosk dialects), and tribal. The efforts of Albanian nationalists to forge a united nation out of the various tribes beginning during the late 19th century were frustrated by wars. Later during the interwar period, Ahmet Zogu (later King Zog) succeeded in laying the groundwork for a united Albanian nation, but his efforts were cut short by Italy's conquest of the country in 1939.

After World War II, the new communist rulers of the country tried once again to construct a sense of Albanian national consciousness. In Fischer's account, the Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha was engaged in a primarily nationalist enterprise, like King Zog, in which he used communist symbols. Hoxha married a particular interpretation of Albanian history to Stalinism to create the myth of an Albanian nation which was under siege from national and ideological enemies. According to this view, the State and Party were justified in the destruction of organized religion as well as the old tribal loyalties which had in the past proved so divisive to Albanian national unity. Fischer concludes that Hoxha was largely successful in his goal of creating a unified Albanian nation.

The essay on Bulgarian nationalism is written by Maria Todorova. She anchors her narrative of the development of Bulgarian nationalism in a clear theoretical framework. She echoes Sugar's introduction by emphasizing the constructed nature of both ethnic and national identity (p.71). Furthermore, she argues that national consciousness and especially nationalism are constructed largely by states (pp.77-78). Thus, the still-born Great Bulgaria of San Stefano provided the starting point for the development of "a full-fledged movement and ideology" of Bulgarian nationalism (p.74). In its pre-World War II incarnation, Bulgarian nationalism was both irredentist (in that it aimed to recover the borders of San Stefano) as well as defensive (inasmuch as it relied on the idea of a Bulgaria surrounded by enemies) (pp.74-75, 80, 92).

Todorova argues that communism's impact on Bulgarian nationalism was minimal. Its main effect was to calm the irredentist flames of Bulgarian nationalism and create in its place a status-quo nationalism. She also argues that there was no such thing as communist nationalism. "The so-called communist nationalism was nothing but a transvestite, ordinary nationalism" (p.91). Thus, af-

ter the fall of the Bulgarian communist regime in 1989, nationalism did not "re-emerge," as is usually asserted, but merely shed its communist "code words" (p.98).

Carol Skalnik Leff's essay on the Czech and Slovak nations focuses on how the national aspirations of these nations were changed by their different experiences. In particular, she demonstrates that various foreign crises, World War II or the 1968 Soviet invasion, for example, had different meanings for Czech and Slovak nationalists. She also stresses the essentially defensive nature of Czech and Slovak nationalisms as well as of Czechoslovakism. The Slovak intelligentsia during the late 19th and early 20th century feared annihilation through the Hungarian government's Magyarization policies and the strong assimilationist pressures on much of the Slovak population (p.122-123). Similarly, post-1918 Czechoslovakism was seen as a necessary counter to the large German and Hungarian populations in inter-war Czechoslovakia (p.127). For many Slovak nationalists, however, Czechoslovakism exchanged the domination of the Hungarians for domination by the Czechs.

The author of the chapter on Greece, Gerasimos Augustinos, does a fine job in integrating some of the elements of Greek history into that of the region as a whole. Augustinos' main argument is that the first problem of Greek nationalism has been its relationship between the Greeks living within the Greek nation-state and "cultural" Greeks living outside of it. Put another way, the story of Greek nationalism involves the tensions between the "national" Greeks and those living in the larger community of Hellenism. The second main problem has been Greece's relation to the Great Powers.

Augustinos argues that for about the first century of the Greek nation-state, Greek nationalism was based on the idea of unifying the broader community of Hellenism with the Greeks of the Kingdom of Greece. This was the well-known Megali Idea ("Great Idea"). Through war and Great Power diplomacy, the Greek nation-state managed to expand its borders steadily, from 1830 through World War I. The fruition of the Megali Idea, which seemed almost at hand in 1920, was destroyed forever in the Ionian disaster of 1922. The enterprise of Greek nationalism since then has been aimed at trying to consolidate Greek national consciousness within the nation-state. A particularly interesting example of this involves the status of the artificial language Katharevousa, a supposedly "pure" form of Greek stripped of its foreign accretions. Katharevousa long remained the official language of the State and thus a kind of elite language which was finally

abandoned only during the 1980's.

The development of Hungarian nationalism, as explained by Tibor Frank, followed some of the same courses as Greek nationalism. "The second part of the nineteenth century saw the gradual transformation of Hungarian nationalism from an originally anti-Habsburg, basically defensive, 'reconstructive' movement geared at national self-determination, into an offensive, anti-minority, imperialist venture" (p.222). Furthermore, the Treaty of Trianon and World War II each gave birth to "new" Magyar nationalisms (p.229). Certain nationalists in the interwar period, such as Count Kuno Klebelsberg, tried to foster a "culturally superior" neo-nationalism with the aim of convincing the world of the injustice done to Hungary at Trianon (pp. 230-231). For most of the Communist era, on the other hand, the government tried to de-nationalize Hungarian history by discouraging discussion of Trianon and by recasting national heroes, such as Kossuth, as heroes in the class struggle (p. 235).

Frank concludes in an apprehensive tone, noting that after the fall of the Communist party's dictatorship, extreme nationalist voices are once again making themselves heard.

In her essay on Polish nationalism, Anita Shelton takes a somewhat different approach than the book's other contributors. The majority of her chapter is taken up by the primary source documents with her own remarks serving to tie them together. Shelton sees the history of modern Poland as dominated by "two not easily reconcilable realities: a powerful and emotional sense of attachment to and pride in national identity, and a very fundamental uncertainty regarding that identity – what does it mean to be a Pole?" (p.264). This dichotomy is strengthened by the numerous contradictory trends in Polish history. The *Rzeczpospolita* was pre-partition Poland's finest achievement but at the same time helped make the country's partition possible. Similarly, pre-partition Poland was known for its tolerance whereas the Poland of the interwar period was riven with ethnic strife and marred by anti-semitism.

As Polish nationalists succeeded in rebuilding the state but then found themselves stymied by the very definition of Polish identity, so too Romanian nationalists achieved territorial unification after World War I but failed in their efforts at political integration. This is the central theme of James Niessen's chapter on Romanian nationalism. Ironically, the problem of integration was exacerbated by the tremendous territorial growth of Ro-

mania after 1918. Between 1912 and 1920 the minority population of Romania increased from 10 percent of the population to 28 percent (p.286). The question of political unity thus became one of prime importance. Seen in this light, the communist period in Romanian history was another step in this integrative process. Nicolae Ceausescu especially was able to link Romanian nationalism with Communist themes (pp.296-297).

Perhaps no other country in eastern Europe has become a greater symbol of resurgent nationalism than Yugoslavia. The dramatic and violent breakup of that country has produced a number of different theories which try to explain it. Denison Rusinow offers his views on the subject in the chapter on Yugoslavia. Central to Rusinow's account is the argument that Yugoslavia (or perhaps more properly the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) was not "a creation of Versailles" (p.373). That is, the Yugoslav idea exerted a real hold on many of the peoples of Yugoslavia, independently of any state-directed attempts to foster it. He points to the relative ease with which the second Yugoslavia was created after World War II, despite the appalling brutality between the different nationalities during the war, as evidence that there was a tacit belief among many (if not most) of the Yugoslav peoples in the Yugoslav idea (p.378). Tito's Yugoslavia was successful, Rusinow argues, in that it was able to marry the Yugoslav and national ideas using a federal political model. While national sentiments did not disappear, no nationality felt its existence to be threatened (pp.387-388).

Rusinow explains the self-destruction of Yugoslavia as the breakdown of this balance. Specifically he concentrates, as others have, on Milosevic's handling of the Albanian-populated Autonomous Province of Kosovo. The annexation by Serbia of the A.P. Kosovo (as well as the A.P. Vojvodina) in 1990 was a signal to the other nationalities that the federal constitutional order was collapsing. Rusinow argues that "Kosovo was...a time-bomb that detonated a chain of explosions in which growing numbers of first Serbs and then Albanians, Slovenes, Croats and others came to believe that part or all of their nation indeed was faced with extinction as a national community – that is, as a community living in a place or places where history and modern doctrines of national sovereignty and self-determination gave it a right to live and to determine its government" (p.407).

In the book's concluding essay, Peter Sugar describes the essence of nationalism in Eastern Europe. Sugar points to three key elements common to the nationalisms

of the area. These are populist myths, a sense of being under siege, and the related problem of political boundaries. Sugar notes that all of the different nationalisms which appear in the book are based in large part on a defensive or siege mentality (p.417). The importance of this attitude is demonstrated by the centrality in the different national mythologies of military or political defeats. For example, the battles of Mohacs and Kosovo for the Hungarians and Serbs, respectively, and the partition of their country in the 18th century for the Poles, are defining national myths for those nations.

The other two important characteristics of Eastern European nationalism are its populist character and the problem of borders. The nationalisms of Eastern Europe have all been based, to a greater or lesser extent, on the myth of the "happy peasant" (p.419). The construction of Eastern European national identities was frequently tied to an increased interest in the peasants as the repositories of the national soul. Unfortunately, this idealized view of the peasant often clashed sharply with the horrible conditions in which most of the rural population of Eastern Europe actually lived.

Finally, the problem of political borders is at the root of much of the tragic history of the region. As Sugar observes, there are virtually no uncontested borders in Eastern Europe (p.419). In fact, the situation could hardly be otherwise, given the fact that most of the nationalities of Eastern Europe did not (and still do not) live in neat, contiguous groups around which one can draw a

line. Attempts to do so invariably have met with disaster. In a chillingly prophetic document of 1915, R.W. Seton-Watson wrote of the "...impossibility of drawing any territorial line of separation between Serbs and Croats, each of the two states...would be torn apart from one end to the other by two rival irredentisms – the Catholics and the Muslims of enlarged Serbia looking to Zagreb and the Orthodox of Dalmatia looking to Belgrade" (p.307). It is precisely the impossibility of drawing political borders which include all of the members of each nationality, along with the strong drive toward homogeneity among most Eastern European nationalisms, which leads to the horrors of massacres and ethnic cleansing. As long as the countries of Eastern Europe cling to the chauvinistic nationalism which has hitherto dominated their domestic political agendas, Sugar argues, it is highly unlikely that they will be able to "play a normal role in European affairs" (p.429).

In conclusion, this is an outstanding book which should be of use to non-specialists as well as "experts." All indications point to the continuing importance of nationalism in the countries of Eastern Europe. As such, this book will be a valuable aid to anyone seeking to understand the region.

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