

Keith Hitchins. *A Concise History of Romania*. Cambridge Concise Histories Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Illustrations. xvi + 327 pp. \$25.19, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-69413-1.



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Commissioned by R. Chris Davis (Lone Star College - Kingwood)

This is a book that every historian in Romania dreams of writing: absorbing in its narrative and wide ranging in terms of its sources, yet perfectly integrated within Romanian national historiography. That it was Keith Hitchins who wrote the book is no surprise. No one, in Romania or abroad, is as respected an authority on Romanian topics as the professor of history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Hitchins is possibly Romania's greatest living historian.

As for the book's substance, Hitchins's strategy is to expand Romania's brief history as a modern state (established in 1859; it gained independence in 1878) into two millennia of history, and to project as widely geographically and diachronically as possible the generic term "Romanians." The result is a book that satisfies both Western curiosity about Romania's largely unknown history and the Romanian historiography's own predilection for master narratives, such as the country's uninterrupted historical continuity and political unity. The fact that Greater Romania was created in 1918 (and included Transylvania, Bukovina,

and Bessarabia) following the First World War and the dissolution of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires only accentuates these themes within the book's teleological interpretation of Romania's history positioned between West and East.

Inspired by the pioneering work of such scholars as Larry Wolff (*Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* [1994]) and Maria Todorova (*Imagining the Balkans* [1997]), historians of Eastern Europe have turned long overdue critical attention to its symbolic geographies and cultural topographies. Perceptively, Hitchins charts the course of Romanian history as a continuous interaction between the West (Catholicism, Protestantism, Enlightenment, nationalism, and so on) and the East (Orthodoxy, traditionalism, rurality, and so on). Indeed, during the period between the world wars, Romanian intellectuals seemed to be fixated on defining national identity as Western or Eastern or both, a debate that the long period of communism did not seem to attenuate; on the

contrary, as the book aptly illustrates, the post-1989 period in Romania is dominated by an almost pathological attempt to “return to Europe.”

This is not a book for specialists. The aim is to introduce the reader (mostly undergraduates in Western universities and the general public) to the standard historical narrative on Romania, one that highlights its rich cultural and historical repertoire. In this respect, this is a useful book. The discussions of various topics (from the Roman conquest of Dacia in the first century to European integration in the twenty-first century) are lucid and often enlightening; in this respect, the book makes a valuable contribution to a scholarship often marred by dogmatism and resentment.

Hitchins does an impressive job of assembling and digesting the vast scholarship on individual regions, historical periods, and cultural themes that constitute the history of the Romanians. A particular strength is the discussion of Romanian communism, a chapter that completes not only this book but also Hitchins’s previously published work on the history of the Romanians (for example, *The Romanians, 1774-1866* [1996] and *Rumania, 1866-1944* [1994]). Key to understanding this convoluted history, Hitchins argues, is the Romanians’ ambivalent relationship with their past and future. While the relationship between West and East stands out as the backbone of Romania’s past and present history, the book allows the reader to ponder over the many other dimensions and interpretations of Romanian history, with all its subtleties and often fictitious nature.

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