

**Marius Turda, ed..** *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900-1945: Sources and Commentaries*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 656 pp. \$176.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4725-3175-9.

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In the last decade, the historiography of eugenics has steadily expanded beyond its original focus on Western Europe and North America.[1] Our understanding of what eugenics meant in different national contexts and time periods has diversified significantly as historians have explored its history and influence in the Soviet Union, Latin America, diverse African countries, Asia, and Australia. Most of this scholarship is, of course, written in the respective national languages. For those interested in the history of Eastern European eugenics, Oxford-based historian Marius Turda now provides an overview of this region's eugenic thought and policies. The volume's clear structure makes it easy for the reader to learn about eugenics in a specific country or to gain an overview of an area that encompasses Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia with Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. For each of these countries, a short essay provides an overview of key actors, eugenic organizations, and eugenically motivated measures and legislation. It also provides insight to their relationship to national health-care policies, political movements, and the frictions that arose. This is followed by short biographies of leading eugenicists and key texts. Here it would have been helpful for the reader to find the year of publication alongside the title; the years are only provided in

the otherwise very useful bibliography that is included at the end of each section.

The strength of this volume, and its individual essays, is the way in which the role of eugenic thought in Eastern European nation building and rebuilding in the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century, when national borders shifted back and forth, and when a former majority could find itself a minority, is described. In the ensuing process of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural homogenization, eugenics offered a tool for biologizing more traditional concepts of race and belonging. Simultaneously, eugenics was an important part of a larger modernization project in which medicine and medical professionals played a disproportionately high role. Thus, eugenics entered public and professional discourse via projects of health and social reform that aimed to improve the health of race and nation.

Particularly interesting is the pioneering analysis of the eugenic subcultures developed by ethnic minorities who found themselves threatened by the homogenization attempts of a larger national majority. As Turda points out, eugenics provided a "defensive biological strategy" to "protect the ethnic minority from a number of challenges posed by the post-Versailles world" by helping to "create the *physical* and *cultural* differences that underpinned the categories of majority

and minority” (p. xix). Filip Krcmar and Tudor Georgescu give two examples of how these strategies could play out in the Volksdeutsche minority in Vojvodina and for the German Saxons in Transylvania. It would, however, have been useful to have further comparative examples beyond these German minorities.

A strength of the volume is the way in which it highlights areas for future research. It falls somewhat short, however, on its promise to “re-define the current scholarship on eugenics by taking into account the multiplicity of scientific, cultural, linguistic and political contexts that served the complex ideological transmission and application of eugenic ideas and practices” (p. xii). Eugenics as a tool of modernization and conservation, and its close ties to national health and reproductive policies, has long been a topic in diverse national historiographies. Here, a stronger contextualization in this international historiography would have helped the reader to better assess the originality and typicality of Eastern European eugenics. Moreover, during the last two decades the historiography of eugenics has diversified to include the categories of gender and of disability, and not the least the perspectives of victims of coercive eugenic measures, such as sterilization. In contrast, the history of eugenics as presented by Turda and his contributors remains strictly one of professional actors and organizations. The target populations of eugenic policy, whose bodies and civil rights were at stake, are only mentioned in passing, and their perspectives are wholly absent. Perhaps as a consequence, disability as an analytic category is missing completely. Here, too, there is much potential for future research.

Nevertheless, with its short essays and translated key texts, *The History of East-Central European Eugenics* is a highly useful resource for research and teaching, especially for readers not versed in the various languages of Eastern European majorities and minorities. The volume succeeds in providing a thorough introduction to eu-

genic thought, movements, and measures in this region.

#### Note

[1]. For an overview, see Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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