Making Eastern Europe's Complexity Accessible to Non-Specialists

An encyclopedia of this type has long been wanting. While specialists may know two or three, and sometimes more languages due to the necessity of their work, they are still likely to find themselves with a question about a person, event, or region that is not likely to be in either an English language encyclopedia, or in an encyclopedia in a language they may know. Nor is it just specialists that have been hindered by this absence. As Richard Frucht explains in the introduction, as a member in a project sponsored by AAASS to encourage greater attention to Eastern Europe in secondary schools, the most widely sited obstacle sited by secondary school educators was the absence of a general reference guide about Eastern Europe. Given this experience, it is not surprising that Garland Publications asked him to what became the volume at hand, or that he felt he could not refuse, and I suspect that many of the Eastern Europeanists on HABSBURG would have reacted the same way.

The results of Frucht’s efforts are considerable. With the help of 215 specialists, he has compiled a single volume chocked full of information about East European geography, culture, history, and politics, which will give secondary school teachers a logical and informative base to set up a unit on Eastern Europe. This is particularly true of the articles surveying the history of Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia, which are intended to be the centerpieces of the work, and contain brief but solid bibliographies for further reading, as well as quite lengthy lists of entries about other relevant, but more specific topics. Noteworthy among this second type of articles are a number of articles that appear intended to break the national boundaries that make it difficult for non-specialists to gain a grasp for the similarities that exist between different countries, exemplified by articles on “peasant parties,” “right-wing radicalism,” and other strings of articles like those on the Communist parties, economic development, and women in the seven countries named above. Beyond that there are biographies of major historical and cultural figures, brief accounts of significant events.
and concepts, and geography to be expected in such a volume, which specialists are most likely to refer to.

That is not to say that specialists will be 100 percent satisfied with the content of the articles. They will spot items that could or should have been included in entries with just a few more words. For the most part these are minor, however, and do not affect the overall value of the information for non-specialists. After all, how important is it that high school students know there were two peasant parties in the Second Polish Republic prior to 1931, when their teachers may only get a week to talk about all of Eastern Europe. Browsing through the articles this reader has spotted several small factual errors, but desirable as an error-free encyclopedia might be, it is also the rarest of rarities, and the errors spotted by this reviewer are not very harmful. Thus much as it may pain this reader's heart to learn that the university in L'vov (sic) was founded in 1656 and not 1661 as was long claimed at the university, or 1784 the date Joseph II established a university there favored by Ukrainian nationalists, the existence of a moderately old university in that city is likely to be news to many.

What may well frustrate laypeople is the decision to conclude the historical surveys for Poland and Romania in 1989, and Albania in 1990. While this can be justified by the encyclopedia's title to go to the fall of Communism, it leaves the difficulties of post-Communist transition a blank spot only partially filled by more specific entries. Had this been a consistent editorial decision, it would have been easily justified, since 1989 is certainly a turning point. But it is not, and the narratives for Bulgaria and Hungary carry through to the late 1990s. Similarly, for obvious reasons, Czechoslovakia's goes until its break-up into independent Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993 and it is supplemented by brief narratives about the two new states, a tack also followed in dealing with the fall of Yugoslavia.

But overall it is not content, but conceptualization and organization that weakens the value of this compendium of knowledge. For the most part this is something scholars are likely to be most sensitive to than lay people, but some seem to be a surprising blindness to some of the basic problems non-specialists are likely to encounter when they try to learn something about Eastern Europe. This is best exemplified by the decision to use proper diacriticals for all East European languages, but without any instruction as to how they should be pronounced. True, this is usually the province of dictionaries, but given American's general unfamiliarity with languages other than English, it would have been particularly useful here, given that now even ten years after he became a well-known figure, one still regularly hears people pronounce the first name of the president of Czechoslovakia, as "vaklav."

Similarly, while the Encyclopedia has a good index, there are none of those useful guideposts in the body of the book to direct readers looking for an article on a particular topic that it is located elsewhere. This is annoying enough when the subject is something with multiple nomenclature, like film, which here is listed as cinema, but it is really a problem when after being referred to the entry for Milan Obrenovic at the end of the article Yugoslavia, one heads to the O's and finds nothing since it is to be found in the M's as are the articles on Milos Obrenovic and his son Mihailo. Also, helpful as the lengthy lists of specific articles at the end of the big historical surveys are meant to be, they are likely to overwhelm readers as help them. Ordered in strict alphabetical order, these cross reference make it difficult to find the entries that might be relevant for a particular time period. Far more manageable and useful for readers would have been for such notification to be made directly in the text as topics come up, or at least at the end of each historical sub-heading.

Indeed, it has occurred to this reader that in the case of Eastern Europe, a purely alphabetical
order may not be the most friendly to lay users. Since the encyclopedia is structured around the lengthy articles about each of the seven "major" nations, it might have been good to order the book along national lines, with all articles concerning a particular country following the main article with an eighth section for topics that are relevant to the whole region or several countries. This would avoid the major page turning one has to do if one wants to read about two related topics that are not close together in alphabetical order like for example the "Polish November Uprising" and "Prince Adam Czartoryski." Be that as it may, the encyclopedia is organized strictly on alphabetical terms, and non-specialists will for the most part find what they are looking for and be satisfied.

East European specialists perusing this encyclopedia can likewise live with those problems, but will be more troubled by a degree of randomness in what was deemed important and what was not. In particular, there is a striking inconsistency in the way Eastern Europe is conceptualized. In the introduction Frucht briefly informs readers that the value of the term "Eastern Europe" is debated among scholars, and then explains that for the purposes of this book, it will refer to those countries, excluding the Soviet Union, that were part of what was known as the East Bloc until 1989. In as much as this is what non-specialists in the United States understand as Eastern Europe, this is acceptable, although specialists and others with familiarity with Yugoslavia and Albania will bristle at the failure to mention its peculiar position vis-a-vis the Soviet Bloc. Still, some acknowledgement of the problem of defining Eastern Europe would have been useful, including the differences between political and cultural borders and the difficulties that has posed, as well as some mention of Russia and the Soviet Union's relationship with these other countries.

But this is not just a matter of something not said, because Frucht deviates from this narrow, but defensible principle when it suits him. Thus, there is an article on the establishment of the independent state of Moldova—indeed Moldova is included on the map of Eastern Europe 1945-1989 as an apparently independent entity. No similar treatment is given to the Baltic republics, which unlike Bessarabia were fully independent entities between 1918 and 1940.

Similar editorial decisions have left this encyclopedia without any articles about either Byelorussians or Ukrainians. The omission of the Byelorussians can be justified since the only time they were not under direct Russian influence between 1815 and 1991 was during the interwar period when a substantial portion lived in the second Polish Republic. This excuse does not work in respect to the Ukrainians. While the majority of Ukrainians, as subjects of the Russian Empire and later citizens of the Soviet Union, may never have had a direct connection to the cultural currents of Eastern Europe, the minority living in Galicia did and played a disproportional role in the shaping of Ukrainian culture.

By the same token, the antagonism between Poles and Ruthenian/Ukrainians was sufficiently important both under Austrian rule and later in interwar Poland to warrant a presentation from their prospective. Such neglect runs close to appearing to be an intentional snub when there is a two-page article on Russia, a further article of more than two pages on the historically much less significant, Carpatho-rusyns. This is topped off by the decision to use the Russian variant for as the heading for the article on the former Galician capital now in Western Ukraine rather than the Ukrainian one Lviv.

Equally problematic for specialists, and particularly historians, is the decision to place the vast majority of historical information in the seven major articles. While this presumably was seen as the best way to deal with what scholars all
know are complex and intertwined histories, it tends to reinforce national historical narratives that are no longer as universally accepted as they once were. But the most troublesome aspect of this weighting of the seven main historical essays is how it has led to inconsistency regarding regional entities of historical importance. Thus, while entries for the Banat, Moldavia, Wallachia, and the United Provinces add significant depth to the article covering Romanian history, the articles on Bukovina and Galicia provide no explanation of their places within the Austrian Empire or anything about nationalities issues besides brief surveys of census statistics. Even less satisfying are the articles for Bohemia and Moravia, which focus only on contemporary geographic and demographic information, with no discussion of them as long-standing historical units that had real meaning for the first century covered in this encyclopedia.

The decisions about what political and cultural figures should be included in such a work are likely always to be subjective. Given the intended audience the inclusion of entries for significant people of East European origin that emigrated to the U.S was wise. But other factors that might make an entry warranted do not seem to have been established beforehand. Thus, Polish literature's first Nobel laureate, Wladyslaw Remont has no entry, although it is precisely lists like those of Nobel prize winners that are likely to prompt non-specialists to seek out information about figures who are not otherwise widely known. Also missing is an entry for Bohumil Hrabal, who was long the symbol of the persistence of Czech culture despite Communist rule, and many of whose works have been translated into English.

Over a century ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. This is not a relevant dictum for the compilation of an encyclopedia, but it is also true that given the complexity of Eastern Europe, however defined, such an encyclopedia was likely to be quirky and appear inconsistent. What ever faults this book may have, it is the kind of single volume reference guide that was needed, containing a great deal of basic information about Eastern Europe, that hitherto has not been easily accessible in public and secondary school libraries. In so doing, Frucht, his editorial advisors, and contributors have blazed a trail suitable for broadening and straightening out at some future time, and as such we owe them thanks.

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