

Interwar East Central Europe, 1918–1941: The Failure of Democracy-Building, the Fate of Minorities. Edited by Sabrina Ramet. London and New York: Routledge, 2020. 360 pp.

The volume, published in the series “Routledge Studies in Modern European History,” brings together ten internationally renowned scholars to discuss the challenges that interwar Europe faced. The preface positions it in the wake of other all-embracing volumes looking at interwar Central and Eastern Europe, the most recent examples being Josef Rothschild’s *East Central Europe Between the two World Wars* (1974), and Ivan T. Berend’s *Decades of Crisis: Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (1998). Recent years have witnessed the emergence of new scholarship drawing inspiration from entangled history and looking at continuities in the post-imperial areas, as well as the impact of nationalizing policies on the processes of democratization. Nonetheless, these trends do not seem to have exerted much influence on the structure of this volume, which is articulated through national unities.

Sabrina Ramet uses the first chapter to clarify the aims of this effort: to trace the roots of the failure of democracy in East Central Europe, as well as the impact of this failure on the statuses of minorities, looking at both domestic (instability and political violence) as well as external factors (the economic crisis and the expanding role of Nazi Germany).

In the second chapter, M. B. B. Biskupski investigates the two alternatives with which the Polish leadership was faced, the one represented by Józef Piłsudski, who envisioned a large and inclusive Poland, and the other, a vision of a smaller and nationally homogeneous Poland, championed by Roman Dmowski. Biskupski, who regards these views as respectively “civic patriotism” and “ethnic nationalism,” blames external factors, which led to a downsizing of Poland’s geopolitical perspective and made the federalist option unfeasible. Chapter three, by Sabrina Ramet and Carol Skalnik Leff, focuses on interwar Czechoslovakia, the only country in the area whose political system is usually praised for its democratic nature. Nevertheless, its major weakness was what the authors describe as the “securitization of democracy” against external enemies. In this context, both the Slovak population and minorities (the German, Hungarian, Jewish, and Ruthenian communities) found themselves in a position of subalternity and unevenness. In chapter four, Béla Bodó examines the Hungarian case, focusing on both minorities within the country and Hungarian minorities abroad. While revisionism remained a central issue of foreign policy,

minorities enjoyed diverse statuses, ranging from that of the Germans, whose fate was increasingly entangled with the relationship between Hungary and the Third Reich, to the Jews, who were subjected to early anti-Semitic legislation which culminated in the late 1930s. The roots and the idea of the “ethnic privilege” enjoyed by the “state-forming nation” in Romania are central to the chapter written by Roland Clark (chapter five). Clark offers an overview of the social, ethnic, and religious context of the country, which included Transylvania, bringing into the country significant Hungarian and German minorities, and saw antisemitism across the political spectrum. As Clark argues, interwar Romania established itself as an exclusionary type of democracy, which drew on the idea of homogenization of minorities. In chapter six, Christian Promitzer explores the case of interwar Bulgaria, retracing its political evolution from the first postwar years of the Agrarian bloc, marked by land reform, to the following shift towards authoritarianism, albeit not fascism, as the later head of the Communist Party, Georgi Dimitrov, would have claimed. This was reflected in the attitude towards the Turkish minority, which was characterized both by increasing discrimination and an attempt to forge an alliance with its most conservative sectors in order to marginalize Kemalism. This marked a difference between the treatment of the Turkish minority by the Bulgarian state and the treatment of Bulgarian-speaking Pomaks, whose assimilation was actively pursued. Promitzer also shows that the contemporary influx of Bulgarian refugees was directly connected with increasing pressure on internal minorities. In chapter seven, Stipica Grgić offers a focused discussion of the Yugoslav state, whose weaknesses and disparities in standards were laid bare in its process of unification. In the background of the rising tensions between centralist and federalist strands as well as widespread instability, non-Slavic minorities experienced pressure, enacted also through the land reform, but they nonetheless tried to establish agreements with government parties. In chapter eight, Bernd J. Fischer offers insights into the turbulent interwar years in Albania, with the ascent to power of King Zog, who created an authoritarian power in a (mostly unsuccessful) attempt to achieve modernization, unity, and stability. While minorities did not represent a troublesome issue for interwar Albania, the existence of an ethnically Albanian population outside the border of the state conditioned both domestic and international relations. The only thematic contribution (Chapter nine) to the book, authored by Robert Bideluex, focuses on peasant parties across East Central Europe. Rejecting the image of backwardness often attached to the agricultural world in Eastern Europe, Bideluex argues that, should they have risen to power, peasant parties

would have pursued an alternative (and more human) pattern of development in respect to both liberal capitalist and communist forces. The afterword to the volume, written by Stefano Bianchini, traces similarities and differences among the case studies and positions the political threads of the region in the interwar period, with an initial minimalistic approach to democracy, which included fair elections but not a real democratization of society, and a gradual shift toward authoritarianism, which accelerated after the beginning of the global economic crisis in 1929.

The effort to put together such a comprehensive volume is noteworthy, though the contributions could have been further harmonized. Moreover, the book acknowledges, with uneven efficacy, the entanglements between domestic and international factors in the treatment of minorities in East Central Europe, which, for the first time, found a theoretical protector in the League of Nations. Furthermore, it shows the social background of the authoritarian drive which led to the demise of democracy in the region by the end of the 1930s.

Nonetheless, the reader might get the impression that, in some of the contributions, nations are regarded as pre-existing entities and multinational states are deemed to fail as not founded on consensus. A further contextualization within the wider European context would have shown that the crisis of democracies was hardly exclusive to the Eastern part of the continent. Furthermore, a deterministic view of the fate of Eastern Europe seems to emerge from time to time, reenforced by the fact that the only country geographically located in Eastern Europe which did not turn to socialism after the Second World War—but shared many features with its neighbors in the interwar period—Greece, is excluded from this analysis. While several contributions stand out for clarity and represent recommended reading for students, specialists might have aspired to some more coherence and transnational insights within the volume. However, the volume is timely in analyzing from a historical perspective two issues that still challenge contemporary Europe: the dialectic between liberal democracy and authoritarianism and the relation with the Other.

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