

Even more interesting than this story of institutional development and colorful personalities are the themes running through the chapters. Some have a very contemporary ring: Fears of Russian encirclement by hostile powers began early: “By the beginning of the reign of Alexander I, this sense of global encirclement had become the driving force of Russian policy toward China” (186). Russian interest in industrial espionage and inability to use it are apparently longstanding problems—Russia got nowhere with porcelain manufacturing. Indeed, its attempt to compensate for military weakness with knowledge from intelligence gathering has a long and checkered history. In the period under discussion, the “Russian Empire tried to use knowledge to bridge the gap between its conquering aspirations and its limited coercive power” but “the connection between knowledge and power was thus an aspiration rather than a reality” (5). Finally, Russian experts on China suffered from a job market limited to government employment—a problem for students of security studies in our own day. Low wages and obscurity were the result.

Some of the book’s conclusions would drive the current government of China mad, such as its description of the reversal of the Russo-Chinese balance of power leaving China no longer “the opposing team but the ball” (257) or, even more incendiary: “Henceforth Russia’s world-historical greatness would be vouchsafed by having China as its junior partner” (262).

Afinogenov is pessimistic about Russian’s accomplishments in the intelligence field. He describes huge changes in Russians’ knowledge making without much success or guidance—with much forgotten in repeated periods of “institutional amnesia” (22). He highlights Russian intelligence’s “uncertainty, its trust in high-level narratives over low-level operatives, its institutional diversity” (259) that left the producers of the knowledge in obscurity until Afinogenov’s careful reassembly of the details of their forgotten lives. Yet perhaps the knowledge produced made possible Russia’s huge territorial acquisitions, touched on in the book’s final part. If so, this is indeed an enduring and consequential legacy that transformed Russia into a Pacific Ocean power.

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***From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe.*** By John Connelly. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. viii, 956 pp. Appendix. Glossary. Notes. Index. Photographs. Maps. \$35.00, hard bound.  
doi: 10.1017/slr.2021.161

Let me begin with my conclusion: eloquently argued, thought-provoking, engagingly written, *From Peoples to Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* should be read not only by east Europeanists of all stripes but by anyone wishing to understand the European past and present. Generally relegated to the periphery of European, not to mention world history, eastern Europe is presented in this book as “a space where more of the twentieth century happened—for good and for bad—than anywhere else on the planet” (3). As John Connelly maintains in his survey of over two centuries of history, eastern Europe has been a distinct region with its own brand of nationalism, to be distinguished from global theories of nationalism advanced by Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, and Benedict Anderson (whom the author takes to task in his superb conclusion).

“An ideology of unrivaled force” (787) possessing explanatory power, nationalism is the red thread that runs through the eight hundred pages (twenty-seven numbered

chapters) of eminently readable—and quotable—text. Even a featured review unfortunately can only hint at its contours and contentions. With a breathtaking command of both larger picture and telling details, Connelly traces the story of the transformation of inchoate peoples into discrete nations that began on the territory of the great central and east European empires. His eastern Europe is defined as an “anti-imperial space of small peoples” (25) preoccupied by the precariousness of their situation: in distinction to nationalisms elsewhere, “East European nationalism is about the fear of disappearance from history; it is about the fear of genocide” (788).

Connelly blames Habsburg Emperor Joseph II for sparking a “fear of oblivion” (24) in this historically heterogeneous space. Joseph’s pragmatic, a-national privileging of the German language elicited diverse, negative, national reactions from Magyars and Czechs. (As noted in a separate chapter, Poles and Serbs already had precocious anticolonial nationalisms of their own.) Yet it was Northern Hungarians (in today’s parlance, Slovaks) who were “crucial for the history of East Central Europe” (86). A tiny, marginal group of Protestants studying in Jena encountered the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder and were transformed into Slavic patriots. They subsequently interacted with other western and southern Slavs, creating standardized languages out of dialects and, on their basis, nations out of peoples. The rest is history: “as soon as patriots created national languages, nationalism itself became the language of politics, and no one who wanted power could avoid speaking it, whether they called themselves liberal, fascist, or Communist” (19–20). Such were the building blocks of national movements, discussed in Part I of the book.

Part II considers the impact of several key events—the revolutions of 1848, the 1867 Compromise, the 1878 Berlin Congress that created Bulgaria, Romania, Montenegro, and Serbia (perhaps the “inaugural event” of the twentieth century [238])—as well as the rise of modern politics. That Habsburg Germans were left out of the German nation-state created by Otto von Bismarck proved to be the “most powerful tributary leading to the fascist mainstream of the 1930s” (241). The rise of mass politics saw the use of the liberal system by noteworthy individuals—including Theodor Herzl, Karl Lueger, Józef Piłsudski, Roman Dmowski—to transcend liberal politics. Dmowski’s party “presaged the rise of radical illiberalism in twentieth century Europe” (167). Concluding Part II is a fascinating chapter on three positively assessed “peasant politicians who transcended peasant politics” (297): Tomáš G. Masaryk, Stjepan Radić, and Aleksandar Stamboliški.

Over half of the book deals with the twentieth century, begun in contingent fashion by Gavrilo Princip’s fateful shots. Part III, on interwar eastern Europe, showcases the historically underrated, “complex revolutionary transformations” (329) that resulted in new liberal nation-states emerging after World War I. In this region, the fate of all kinds of revolutions (including the liberal one espoused by Woodrow Wilson and the communist one of the Bolsheviks) were determined. The failure of the “first-ever mass experiment in democratization” (327) suggests that multinational states such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, and perhaps even Romania would have been better served by federalist solutions. Another reason why national self-determination failed was that the democracy that should have empowered peasants was frustrated by the elites. In its most extreme form (in Romania and Hungary), “the legacy of contempt by their liberal elites for the common people” (392) led to fascism. Connelly argues that elsewhere in the region fascism—which he sees as “not hypernational but anti-national” (410)—was marginal.

Part IV, at nearly 250 pages the largest of the lot, is impressively nuanced. Adolf Hitler “did not get the war he desired” (436), on account of Polish and Serbian intransigence. Having rebuffed Hitler’s overtures, Poland witnessed the unleashing

of “unprecedented” (441) violence upon it, leaving that country an exception to the rule: “for the majority of East Europeans, the war was something that intruded on their lives mainly through daily newspapers” (470). A coup in Yugoslavia distracted Hitler from his plan to invade the Soviet Union earlier. With the meteoric rise of the Partisans, Europe had its “first antigenocidal army” (457). Still, the Holocaust not only touched but also tarnished all of east central Europe—including Bulgaria, whose better reputation is not fully deserved, as Connelly demonstrates: despite despising and often resisting Nazi rule, “everywhere [the local populations] acceded to the central aspect of it” (500): the annihilation of Europe’s Jews, considered outside of their national communities. Powerful insights on the postwar period follow. The countries of the region were moving in the direction of “Soviet forms of rule after 1944—even if Soviet leaders themselves did not intend that outcome right away” (502). Communists of the region became rabid nationalists. Both Stalinism and destalinization were on the whole foreign impositions. Connelly reminds us there were strikes in three countries—Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany—in 1953, the last of which he labels as “counterproductive” (570). In the heady year of 1956, Hungarians and Poles drew the opposite lessons from each other. Subsequent developments were the reverse of what might have been expected: not Władysław Gomułka’s Poland but rather János Kádár’s Hungary became the “happiest barracks in the bloc” (588). Czechoslovakia’s communist reformers are depicted as nationalists, their 1968 Prague Spring crushed “for the sake of imperial interests” (637) by the Soviets. A probing chapter on “real existing socialism,” or what life was like for Homo Sovieticus more broadly, concludes Part IV.

Part V, “From Communism to Illiberalism,” traces the “gradual sapping of faith” (687) in the region, beginning with events in Poland that led to the Solidarity trade union movement in 1980. Connelly argues that power was not seized in 1989; rather, the transfer of power had already begun. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev undid what Stalinism had achieved, while undermining Leninism—rule by a tiny, self-selected group—in the process. 1989 is compared to 1848: “if 1848 was an attempt of urban classes to throw off the shackles of feudalism, 1989 was the effort of entire societies to shake off a modernization that came to seem counterproductive and inappropriate” (740). The fate of the previously harmonious multinational Yugoslavia, undone by an extremist-led, opportunistic ethnic nationalism, is poignantly rendered. Elsewhere, as regards the period of transformation, “nationalism seemed curiously dormant,” except for Czechoslovakia—at least, until today’s illiberalism, with which Connelly concludes.

A few words on the geographic scope of the book are in order. *From Peoples to Nations* does not include treatment of the Baltic states or other post-Soviet peoples (here, most notably absent are western Ukrainians). Nor, of the Eastern bloc countries, does Albania really figure much, while East Germany is featured in Parts IV and V. The terms “Eastern Europe” and “East-Central Europe” are used interchangeably. None of this seeming fuzziness detracts from the work, which is compellingly argued and organized as well as impressively researched. There are fine maps and illustrations sprinkled throughout the book (alas, no lists of either appear after the table of contents) as well as an appendix of tables in the back. Princeton University Press is to be lauded for pricing a book of this size so reasonably, which should garner for it a wide readership. All told, John Connelly has written a powerfully argued history of eastern Europe, with which historians of the region and beyond will have to reckon; elements of the book should spark ample debate and discussion in the years to come.

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