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BOOK REVIEW

Mikanowski, Jacob. Goodbye, Eastern Europe: An Intimate History of a Divided Land

New York: Pantheon, 2023. Pp. 400.

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Finally, a mass market book that would explain Eastern European history to the average reader without oversimplification, stereotypes, and methodological nationalism. The author's education (history PhD from UC Berkeley) made me hopeful that this book would be informed by historiography instead of vibes. But because Mikanowski has spent years working in American journalism, the book is also steeped in vibes. *Goodbye, Eastern Europe* is easy reading, and it has a distinct atmosphere to it: gray, muddy, bloody, a place "where nearly everyone was illiterate, and holy writ existed as little more than a rumor or a song" (61). In that way, it ultimately tends to reinforce stereotypes about the region that have been around for a long time.

Mikanowski's Eastern Europe is the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Habsburg lands, and the European Ottoman Empire. It is not Russia, it is not Germany, it is rarely the Baltic coast. The story is focused on the "small places" in between from around the ninth century to the present. This is a world of many faiths, folk cultures, and a variety of languages that have passed into forgetting. Historical anecdotes are interspersed with personal narratives from the author's family to highlight the diversity and "confusion" of the region.

The structure is its strength. Rather than focusing on dynasties and battles, he opens the book with faiths: Pagans, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and heretics. This serves up a more realistic account of early modern society's structure, based not on individual rights but group privileges and obligations. However, he fails to let his reader in on this until much later (113). The middle section of the book covers empires, peoples, nations, and "wanderers." This last category—focused mostly on Roma—is an admirable effort and welcome addition. Every chapter is chock full of wonderful little stories that any workaday lecturer grinding it out in this abysmal job market shouldn't think twice about stealing for themselves.

Methodological nationalism doesn't account for diversity or marginalized groups, which is why Mikanowski's efforts in this vein are well appreciated. All the same, one must be especially careful to avoid projecting nations into the past. We read that Crimean Tatars were "Turks" (46); "Khmelnystky's revolt was conducted in the name of the Ukrainian people (26)"; and that Ukraine became independent in 1648 (91). Of course, this terminology can be shorthand for the reader, but ultimately it matters more to me that we avoid anachronisms in the service of disarming nationalism.

In the final section of the book, Mikanowski provides accounts of the interwar years, World War II, Stalinism, and post-Thaw socialism. The chapter that purports to be about World War II is only about the Holocaust. "Stalinism" focuses on economic ambitions and the persecution of political enemies, though he does not tell us why the regime persecuted people. And in "Socialism" we learn about scarcity and the ingenuity of people living in an era of worn-out ideas. Here we spend more time with Romania than anywhere else for some reason.

It is also a section in which Mikanowski's grating penchant for overstatement appears once again. "In the 1980s," he writes, "Romanian ethnographers noted that in some rural areas, relatives of the dead 'would put packets of American Kent cigarettes in the coffin so the dead could pay the "customs duty" on the way to the nether world'" (280–81). Compare this with the source: "Professor Mihai Pop

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once wrote somewhere he had heard tell of a most intriguing practice in Romanian countryside: the relatives of the dead would put packets of American Kent cigarettes in the coffin so the dead could pay the 'customs duty' on the way to the nether world" (*Martor* 7 [2002], martor.memoria.ro; emphasis added). So there was no ethnographic study and the story is perhaps apocryphal.

As we get closer to the present, Mikanowski shares more of his family story to connect the history of late communism to the chance events that led to his birth in the United States. Despite this familial connection to the history he recounts, Mikanowski has a strong tendency to Orientalize, distancing himself from the people who live in his Eastern Europe. As he writes in the epilogue, "Many Eastern European nations face an odd predicament. They possess a surplus of history, but a deficit of useful narrative. That is, plenty of things have happened *to* them, but not enough has been done *by* them to establish a deeply rooted sense of shared destiny" (310).

I assume the intention here was innocent, that Mikanowski is only highlighting the fact that Eastern Europe has been the "playground" of Great Powers. But nonetheless there are millions of human beings who call that place home, who have done plenty of things on their own, who write their own history and their own narratives. One need look no further than Ukraine, a state that has struggled to forge an identity since the fall of communism, but today there can be no doubt that Ukrainians have a deeply felt "sense of shared destiny."

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