

The Middle Kingdoms: A New History of Central Europe. By Martyn Rady.

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Standard histories of East Central Europe—both ‘classics’ and more recent ones—tend to take the concept of ethnicity and the complicated processes of nation-building in the region as their *leitmotif*. These volumes treat the patchwork of intermingled ethnic groups progressing towards nationhood as the conceptual framework through which Central Europe and especially its modern era is best understood. This paradigm is well represented across the major syntheses of the field, including works by Wandycz, Johnson, and Sugar, *inter alia*.¹ More recent scholarship has complicated but not displaced this framework: John Connolly’s ambitious synthesis retains the nation as its organising category even while acknowledging its contingent and contested construction.²

There are, however, important exceptions to this ethnicity- and nationalism-centred mainstream. One alternative tradition draws its inspiration from Alexander Gerschenkron’s theses on economic backwardness, reading East Central European modernity primarily through the lens of structural underdevelopment and the politics it generated. Andrew C. Janos and the Hungarian scholarly duo of Iván T. Berend and György Ránki are usually mentioned as the foremost representatives of this approach, proposing the gap between core and periphery as the region’s defining predicament rather than the national question as such.³ A second, culturalist alternative is today less in scholarly vogue; its founding father is Oskar Halecki, whose *Borderlands of Western Civilisation* proposed a civilisational framework that

* Originally published by Basic Books (New York) and Allen Lane (UK) in 2023.

1 Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom*; Johnson, *Central*; Bideleux and Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe*; Sugar, *East European Nationalism, Politics and Religion*.

2 Connolly, *From Peoples into Nations*.

3 Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World*; Berend and Ránki, *East Central Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries*.

situated the region's identity in long-term cultural and religious continuities rather than in ethnic formations or economic structures.⁴

Perhaps the newest exception to the 'standard' histories of entangled nationalisms is Martyn Rady's *The Middle Kingdoms: A New History of Central Europe*. Where the standard syntheses take the nation and its (missing) ethnic foundations as their organising principle, Rady's work is structured around the state—its formation, its fragility, its reconstitution—tracing this theme continuously from the early medieval period onward, even across centuries in which statehood as a conceptual category had not yet been articulated. This state-focused narrative carries significant interpretive consequences: because durable political institutions and the legacies of medieval and early modern rule are placed at the centre of the story, the history of Germanic and Hungarian political orders necessarily receives relatively greater attention than in works where Slavic histories and national awakening set the agenda. The result is a regional history that reads quite differently from the nation-building canon. It is less concerned with the crystallisation of ethnic communities into political nations, and more focused on the institutions within which a given subregion's peoples operated.

Rady's work is also unmistakably written in the British academic tradition, and this shapes its texture as much as its architecture. The prose is distinctly not continental and that of a historical narrative in the traditional sense: lucid, dynamic and replete more with well-chosen illustrative details. These details then illuminate broader arguments and sometimes daring propositions, rather than serving as building blocks of some large, structural and overarching claim. Equally characteristic is the author's voice: Rady reserves the historian's right to pass judgment on historical figures and decisions, doing so frequently and at times with a slight streak of sarcasm. This is a recognisably British scholarly habit—one thinks of the tradition running from Lewis B. Namier and reaching its most acerbic expression in A. J. P. Taylor, with regard to the many blunders of continental statesmen—, where the historian's retrospective knowledge is deployed not merely to explain, but also to evaluate. Rady does not go as far as Taylor in his verdicts, but his tone is at times in that lineage. The end effect of it all is a book that is as pleasurable to read as it is intellectually substantial.

The state-centric perspective that defines Rady's approach becomes apparent already in the book's opening chapters (pp. 10–76). Rather than beginning, as many regional histories do, with the ethnogenesis of peoples and their gradual settlement across the post-Roman landscape, Rady anchors his narrative in the great imperial formations that gave the region its first eminent political structures: the Roman

4 Halecki, *Borderlands of Western Civilization*.

Empire, the Carolingian order, and—by way of an instructive detour through the Avars—the early Holy Roman emperors. This is a welcome corrective, and a historiographically significant one, foregrounding institutional and political continuities that ethnicity-centred accounts tend to relegate to the role of backdrop. If there is a lacuna, it lies on the other side of this emphasis: a reader seeking a richer account of how the many Slavic ethnies arrived, emerged, and mingled across the region during the centuries of late antiquity and the early to high Middle Ages—a complex and still-debated process of migration, assimilation, and identity formation—will find that Rady's framework, precisely because of its focus, leaves that story somewhat underexplored. This is less a flaw than an inevitable consequence of the book's governing logic: where there is no state to narrate, the narrative moves briskly.

If the opening chapters establish Rady's governing framework, it is in his treatment of the high and late medieval and early modern periods—spanning roughly chapters 6 through 14—that the book reaches its fullest brilliance, and where it stands as one of the finest syntheses of Central European history produced in recent decades. Here, the label 'state-centric' requires immediate qualification: what emerges from these chapters is not a story of consolidated sovereign power but of something far more intricate and, in its way, more impressive. The political formations Rady describes are composite, layered, and perpetually incomplete—structures in which locality and regionality are constitutive, where overlapping jurisdictions, carefully circumscribed rights, and negotiated privileges do not coalesce into the centralised state that later centuries would imagine as normal. What is remarkable, and what Rady conveys very well, is that this very complexity was functional: these arrangements sustained an impressive degree of integrated social and political life across extraordinarily diverse territories and populations. Far from being a story of failure or incompleteness, the medieval Central European order emerges in Rady's telling as an achievement on its own terms—one whose fragility and sophistication both deserve to be recognised.

Rady's treatment of the seventeenth century and the long transition to modernity, across chapters 15 through 22, shines in places but also reveals some of the interpretive costs of his particular enthusiasms. His account of the confessional conflicts, the Wars of Religion, and the Counter-Reformation is enlightening, and his willingness to linger on the stranger byways of the period—the culture of alchemy at the court of Rudolf II, for instance—reflects the same wit and eye for detail that distinguishes the book throughout. Yet this very quirkiness can tip into imbalance. The flourishing of Austrian and Polish Baroque cultures—among the most consequential aesthetic and ideological formations in the region's history—receives surprisingly little sustained attention, as do the institutions of Protestant learning that shaped confessional identities and educated generations of the region's elites.

A historian who devotes space to imperial curiosities but barely discusses broad institutional traditions of the region owes the reader a justification for the omission or, perhaps even better, a more detailed discussion of such phenomena. The imbalance is still more pronounced when one turns eastward. The external crises of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—its Cossack wars, the catastrophic Muscovite conflicts, and above all the Deluge, the Swedish-led devastation of the 1650s that permanently broke the Commonwealth's capacity for recovery—are handled with a cursoriness that sits uneasily beside the attention lavished on Habsburg affairs and even when compared with Polish internal politics. The result is that the collapse of the greatest eastern state of Central Europe is presented largely as an eighteenth-century story with antecedents of state weakness—but not a discussion of the impossible diplomatic environment in which the Commonwealth found itself.

One of the most structurally distinctive features of Rady's book is its historical proportionality. Most synthesising histories of Central Europe devote the better part of their pages to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, treating the medieval and early modern periods as prologue. Rady inverts this convention: nearly two-thirds of the book is devoted to pre-Napoleonic history, with barely over a third given to the last two centuries. This is a welcome and intellectually defensible choice, redressing a chronic imbalance in the literature. The resulting and predictable problem, however, is one of compression. The last two centuries must accommodate not only the history of East Central Europe proper but also German history. And these are, after a certain point, stories that unfold along sharply divergent trajectories. There is a reason German history is conventionally treated in its own dedicated literature: while the early to mid-nineteenth century can be presented as a genuinely interwoven Central European story, and Rady handles this interweaving with considerable skill, the events of 1866 and 1871 drive a wedge between Borusso-German and East Central European development that never fully closes. Fitting both into under two hundred small-format pages is an almost impossible task.

Nothing illustrates this difficulty more vividly than the chapter entitled "Bismarck, Khuen-Héderváry's Croatia and the Presumption of the Law" (pp. 383–397). In fifteen pages, Rady must do justice simultaneously to the grandeur of Bismarckian statecraft and to the internal logic of the Danubian empire as it institutionalised the Compromise of 1867. The choice of Khuen-Héderváry as a vehicle for the Habsburg half of the story is, in its way, a stroke of genius: the Croatian Ban's masterclass in manipulative governance illuminates, in *pars pro toto* fashion, the near-impossibility of managing overlapping and increasingly ethnicised claims over territory and political representation. And Rady does succeed in conveying that the Habsburg lands were also a space of real development and progress even amidst quasi-constant political tension. Yet Khuen-Héderváry cannot carry the narrative

weight that Ferenc Deák, Gyula Andrásy, or Kálmán Tisza would have brought to it, and their near-absence is puzzling. More consequentially, the chapter never fully addresses the fateful structural difference between German and Austro-Hungarian state-building in the late nineteenth century: the centrifugal and centripetal forces pulling at the Dual Monarchy, the question of why its centaur-like construction proved ultimately unworkable. Just as the cursory discussion of the seventeenth-century Polish crises leaves the eventual dissolution of the *Rzeczpospolita* feeling somewhat inevitable and underexplained, so the missing analysis of the Monarchy's internal tensions renders the end of that remarkable state less analytically gripping than the subject deserves (pp. 414–430).

The treatment of the twentieth century across chapters 29 through 33 is, given the constraints of space, a remarkable balancing act. In barely a hundred pages, Rady manages to cover a surprisingly broad spectrum of historical experience, from Expressionist cinema to the grinding dysfunctionality of planned economies, from the catastrophes of the two world wars to the peculiar textures of late socialist everyday life. In so doing, he avoids both collapsing into schematic summary and losing the narrative wit that distinguishes the book throughout. It is, in many respects, as sharp-sighted a short account of the region's most violent and convulsive century as the literature offers. The same cannot be said, however, for the book's final discussion of the post-1989 decades. An author is perfectly entitled to close a long-range synthesis before the present, and there is a case to be made for treating the fall of the Iron Curtain as a natural terminus. What is harder to defend is the alternative Rady chooses: a discussion of the post-socialist era that runs to a mere thirteen pages, of which a large portion is devoted to genuinely captivating writing about the Slovenian experimental rock band Laibach, with Slavoj Žižek appearing as a philosophical accompanist. This is not an entirely wayward choice. Laibach is a fascinating entry point into the layered complexities of post-Habsburg and post-totalitarian sensibilities, where the absurd becomes the common denominator for histories of state violence and oppression mixed with a fierce, irrepressible drive for individual autonomy that no government or decree could ever fully extinguish from this rebellious region. But Laibach cannot substitute for an account of the entanglements of post-socialist reform under the shadow of the Washington Consensus, the legalistic and economically-defined 'return to Europe', the unravelling of the civic movements that toppled the old regimes, or the emergence of the East Central European new hard right—a troubling and thus far insufficiently interpreted phenomenon that any serious reckoning with the region's present must confront.

Any single-volume history of Central Europe is, by necessity, an act of sustained and consequential decision-making, and Rady's *The Middle Kingdoms* is no exception. What distinguishes the book is the author's unorthodox perspective:

he offers a version of the regional past that deliberately breaks with the ethnohistorical predilections of the standard syntheses, re-centring the state, the fragile yet persistent organising force, whose late and incomplete consolidation after the crises of the early modern period makes its history all the more revealing rather than less. In doing so, Rady manages to paint a tableau of remarkable breadth and colour. It is occasionally difficult to accept that canonical stories, including the Czech national movement or the Polish émigré tradition, receive shorter treatment and occupy less central positions in the narrative than might be expected. But the author's priorities are internally consistent, and the alternative story he constructs in their place is genuinely rewarding and animated throughout by an analytic intelligence that takes the region seriously on its own terms. That, in the end, is as much as can reasonably be asked of any book that dares to take on a subject of such irreducible complexity, and *The Middle Kingdoms* not only succeeds as a book on its own but manages to demonstrate the added value of changing perspectives at times.

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