

The Rise of Comparative History. Edited by Balázs Trencsényi, Constantin Iordachi, and Péter Apor.

Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021. 404 pp.

Nóra Szigethy 

Department of English and American Studies, University of Szeged, 2 Egyetem utca, 6722 Szeged, Hungary; noraa.szigethy@gmail.com

The Rise of Comparative History edited by Balázs Trencsényi, Constantin Iordachi, and Péter Apor and published by the CEU Press is a prodigious volume on the discipline of the comparative perspective applied to the academic field of historical studies. First and foremost, it is a reader of key texts, originally written in various languages by scholars of various nationalities, that aims to show and promote the comparative method and transnational history-writing in its entirety for scholars to use in their research and to understand history not only limited to local points, but on a higher level, to encompass the history of predominantly East Central Europe from the time of the Middle Ages moving on to the World War I and well into the interwar period. The choice of this rather broad timeline allows the editors to list a vast number of experts who have worked in the field of comparative history and encourage readers to establish connections. The book is also a wonderfully representative way to display what comparative history is. Louis Davillé, one of the authors defining the comparative method, shows that, “[...] in its superior form, science is a system of relations.” Following the Introduction where the three editors offer “A View from East Central Europe,” the book is divided into three major sections, which helps the reader easily maneuver among the chapters: the editors focus on making the comparativist tradition as well as recent debates readily available to students and advanced researchers alike.

In the first major section titled “Defining the Comparative Method,” we read papers by outstanding early twentieth century scholars whose intent was to prioritize comparison as an analytic tool for scientific investigation. Beginning with Kurt Breysig’s piece, we immediately get an insight into how he believed the comparative method could move beyond the purely descriptive method, that had been the prominent way of history writing for several centuries. His study is followed by the findings of Louis Davillé’s 1913 “Comparison and the Comparative Method, Particularly

in Historical Studies,” where he tried to integrate the comparative method into a framework of scientific inquiry. Then, we read Henri Pirenne’s 1923 “On the Comparative Method in History,” where his aim was to overcome what he refers to as ‘racial’ bias between European nations when inspecting differences and similarities between them from a historical viewpoint. As we see in Henri Sée’s “Historical Science and Philosophy of History,” he took inspiration from Pirenne’s work and believed that a historian’s duty was to explain historical change by the method of comparison. The section closes with Marc Léopold Benjamin Bloch’s 1928 paper evaluating the advantages and the limitations of the comparative method.

The next two major sections introduce the East Central European contemporaries of the West European scholars included in the first section. “Structures and Institutions” begins with a 1931 essay by Otto Hintze, who tackles two broader themes and their differences from the perspective of sociology and history. First, Hintze explores the role of the medieval system of estates in the birth of modern constitutionalism and how it was related to institutional and constitutional development, looking at the whole of Europe. Second, he attempts to answer how historical individuality in its singularity can be made compatible with comparative historical studies. Our attention is directed at the Balkan Peninsula in Jovan Cvijić’s 1918 anthropogeographic study, in which he analyses the psychological and sociocultural features of communities living in the Balkans. His study contributed greatly to the emergence of Balkan Studies, which rose to significant presence in the 1930s. Next, in favor of comparative history, in “The Common Character of Southeast European Institutions,” Nicolae Iorga warns us as early as 1929 against writing national histories in isolation: he emphasizes that historians should place their findings within the framework of universal history. This is followed by Jan Rutkowski’s 1928 argumentation that a comparative analysis could highlight certain regional trends in Polish socioeconomic history which, in turn, could be contrasted with Western European developments. Gheorghe I. Brătianu’s 1933 essay focuses on the history of the Black Sea and applies a comparative perspective. Starting from the position that “[a] more profound knowledge of the economic and social history of Eastern Europe has revealed to historians that the social evolution of the West and that of the East have been proceeding in opposite directions in the modern era”, he compares the historical development of Eastern and Western Europe in the early medieval period. The second section of *The Rise of Comparative History* ends with István Hajnal’s 1942 essay “On the Working Group of the Historiography of Small Nations,” where he presents Hungarian historians’ wish for a transnational comparative approach to history.

The third section is titled “Beyond the National Grand Narratives,” reiterating the warning that we should not inspect developments in history in isolation. This section gives space to Marceli Handelsman’s 1932 comparative study that looks at “The Development of

Nationalities in Central-Eastern Europe” and analyses the social and political conditions of the emergence of nationalism. In answer to the question, he raises in his 1934 “What is Eastern Europe,” Oskar argues that it is a historical region, and he introduces the notion of Central Europe. An excerpt from Charles Seignobos’ last major work published in 1938 tours the interconnected events of the 1848 revolutionary period and states that the French development served as a model for further movements. Taken from the very first issue of the *Revue Internationale des études balkaniques*, Milan Budimir and Peter Skok’s 1934 “Aim and Significance of Balkan Studies” is directly connected to Balkan Studies and enunciates the wish to create a regionally encompassing common historical narrative. In “The Effect of the War in Southeastern Europe,” first published in 1936, David Mitrany analyses how the World War I affected the Balkans: here, comparative history serves political criticism and further promotes the importance of the region. The history of the Balkans receives remarkable attention in the book that the paper comes from. Victor Papacosteas’ 1943 “The Balkan Peninsula and the Question of Comparative Studies” also argues that historians of the Balkans should go beyond national compartments. Finally, we arrive at “Southeast Europe and the Balkans,” originally published in 1943, where Fritz Valjavec defines Southeast Europe in the complexity of politics, culture, and religion.

The Rise of Comparative History is a truly fascinating read dedicated to the comparative method in historical research. The editors deserve acknowledgement for their meticulous work in selecting texts and providing vital theoretical foundations. When read together, the papers create an inclusive overview of Western and Eastern European history. In order to help orientation and interpretation, preceding the studies, readers will find each scholar’s biographical data and a summary and evaluation of their oeuvre. The book also draws attention to the fact that while from the 1990s the comparative method received various forms of criticism, it remains a major tool of inquiry. Thus, historians are encouraged to continue the comparative tradition in their research. Therefore, *The Rise of Comparative History* is not only a greatly useful reference, but a book that may inspire historians in their own field of study.

