

Ramet, Sabrina P. (Ed.) *Interwar East Central Europe, 1918-1941. The Failure of Democracy-building, the Fate of Minorities.* London: Routledge, 2020. 360 pp. ISBN 978-0367135706

This book edited by Sabrina P. Ramet (Professor Emerita of Political Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), in Trondheim, Norway) focuses on a topic which has in recent years been “reborn” in European historiography. The interwar period seems crucial in the development of the east-central European countries during WW II and its aftermath – which resonates still today. The authors have chosen to elaborate on in detail Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. The monograph focuses especially on the failure to establish and stabilize democratic regimes, as well as on the fate of ethnic and religious minorities (which were the key factors leading up to WW II.). The topics covering changes over the period of review include land reforms, Church–state relations, culture, and the political systems.

In the preface, the editor answers the important question as to why another book is needed on interwar Europe, and analyses earlier volumes on interwar East Central Europe – Hugh Seton-Watson’s *Eastern Europe between the Wars, 1918–1941* (Cambridge University Press, 1945); C. A. Macartney and A. W. Palmer’s *Independent Eastern Europe: A History* (Macmillan/St. Martin’s Press, 1962); Joseph Rothschild’s *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (University of Washington Press, 1974); Edward D. Wynot’s *Cauldron of Conflict: Eastern Europe, 1918–1945* (Harlan Davidson, 1999); and Ivan Berend’s *Decades of Crisis: Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (University of California Press, 2001).

The first chapter is an introduction written by Sabrina P. Ramet which at the very beginning poses 2 key questions: „*How far back in time should we trace the origins of the failure? And What were the primary causes of failure?*“. Readers may find not only questions, but also answers in the next part of the chapter (more for the second one). The author describes the complicated journey of each state towards a unitary entity, many had a convoluted character, for example in Poland: „*.../during 1918 – 1919, there were as many as six currencies in circulation in Poland: German marks, Austrian crowns, Russian rubles, Polish marks, “occupation marks” issued by the German High Command in the east, and varieties of Russian currency. Until 1920, a tariff barrier remained in place between former Prussian Poland and the rest of Poland, and one even needed a passport to travel from Warsaw to Poznan’. Four legal systems functioned in the emergent Polish state*“. Although the author refers to his research question, the text more resembles a short piece tracing historical development (although there are some interesting facts, such as, „*Table 1.3, Coups in interwar East Central Europe*“). The concluding part of the introduction is devoted to the cases of Romania and Czechoslovakia, with the conclusion summarizing why democracy in East central Europe states failed, and what the fate of minorities in the interwar period was. The reader may ascertain only general findings, with not much new brought to the topic.

The second chapter is on *the Polish Second Republic, The geopolitics of failure* by M. B. B. Biskupski (a Polish-American historian and political scientist who since 2002 has been the Endowed Chair in Polish and Polish-American Studies at Central Connecticut State University) describes why The Second Polish Republic was doomed. The author presents the history of interwar Poland in a very objective and unbiased way: „*The Second Republic was the worst possible solution to the country’s intrinsic difficulties. It was too small to be safe in international affairs, but had too many minorities to be stable and democratic.*“ (It may be added that this was not only the case of Poland.) The author oscillates in the text between two concepts; Piłsudski’s federalism and Dmowski’s national “incorporation”, and shows their roles in crucial moments of Polish policy: „*what Piłsudski saw as Poland’s historic moment to regain the lost commonwealth, Dmowski’s nationalists feared would involve acquiring a huge minority population*“. He describes in detail the obstacles and problems which accompanied the creation of a re-emerging Poland (Danzig, Silesia etc.), the Polish – Bolshevik war, the building of a new Poland, and the “sanacja.” regime. Biskupski has no problem pointing out the opportunistic policy of the western powers, for example, in July 1920 Polish leaders met with leaders of France and Great Britain, at a Spa in Belgium to discuss possible aid in stopping the Red Army. Poland had enormous problem with minorities mainly, as the author states, because: „*Germans were the most anti-Polish minority in the Second Republic, even the Ukrainians had proponents of cooperation with the Poles.*“ Ukrainian nationalism also presented a serious threat and led to the events in Wołyń’ (Volhynia) during the Second World War. The author does not avoid the question of the Polish Jews and describes their position in detail, while Ruthenians are also noted, representing 1,219,647 citizens of Poland, although, as such, Ruthenian nationality is still disputed. Biskupski states that Poland failed in solving the minorities’ problems, in that: „*Aggressive nationalism increased among the minority population in the face of clumsy and often aggressive Polish efforts at assimilation.*“

The third chapter, *Interwar Czechoslovakia – A National State for a Multi-ethnic Population*, is co-written by Sabrina P. Ramet and Carol Skalnik Leff (Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois, Urban-Champaign, Illinois). The authors begins by alluding to the differences between Czech and Slovak perceptions of the interwar Czechoslovak republic (including its character, which has been frequently overvalued). There follows a sub-heading, “*Czechoslovakia as a militant democracy*“ – although what exactly militant democracy means in the context of inter-war Czechoslovakia (apart from Miroslav Mareš definition) is very questionable. The next heading „*The Czechs in power*“ again is somewhat dubious – there were, in fact, prominent figures of Slovak political elites like V. Šrobár, M. Hodža, and from an economic point of view we cannot omit Germans and Jews. The authors could also have discussed the question how the Little Entente affected the failure of Czechoslovak democracy – for example, in the Czechoslovak press we could find the praising of the establishment in Yugoslavia of the January 6 Dictatorship of Alexander I. in a democratic Czechoslovakia.¹ Such ties with Romania and Yugoslavia were very important in imagining the complex picture of interwar Czechoslovakia. Through the whole text we may

¹ The article appeared in *Slovenský denník*, Vol. XII., No. 290, Tuesday 17. 12. 1929, Bratislava.

feel the influence of older Western and Czechoslovak exile historiography, but the authors could have used more recent titles from Slovak and Czech historiography.

Chapter four, written by Béla Bodó (Professor of History at the University of Bonn, Germany) is dedicated to *Interwar Hungary /Democratization and the fate of minorities/*. The author starts with a survey on how the world and Europe was transformed by World War I., the emergence of new states, and the failures of several minorities to achieve their goals. He states that: „*The majority of Croats, Slovenes, Slovaks, Bosniaks, and Ruthenians failed to identify with the new states in which they found themselves.*“ This statement is only partially true since from the beginning even Croats were enthusiastic about the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; while Ruthenians in Transcarpathia who belonged to Czechoslovakia were highly satisfied with their new statehood, and some Slovaks were „hostile“ against a common state with the Czechs² - which also differed greatly between the 1920s and 1930s in Slovak political discourse. I am not quite sure whether, as the author wrote: „*The founders of the Wilsonian New Order recognized the harmful effects of modern nationalism*“ ... if it was so true, would they have imprisoned, for example, great numbers of Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia? However, the main aim of the chapter is „*the fate of ethnic minorities in interwar Hungary from a regional perspective*“, and while B. Bodó mentions Ruthenia, one may feel confused by what he means by using this term. Does he mean Carpathian Ruthenia? – since the term Ruthenia was used in the middle and early-modern period as one of several designations for East Slavic regions. The author states: „*In all three states, Hungarians faced economic, cultural, and political discrimination in the interwar period.*“, and while we may accept some kind of discrimination, in the case of Czechoslovakia we cannot agree with political and cultural oppression. Hungarians established many organizations throughout Czechoslovakia (for example: Szlovenszkói Magyar Kultúregyesület), and in Košice we may mention Kazinczy Társaság and many others.³ In Czechoslovakia, Hungarian political parties existed which had their deputies in a national assembly and senate – Országos Keresztényszocialista Párt, Magyar Nemzeti Párt, Egyesült Magyar Párt.⁴ However, in 1920 141, 910 Slovaks lived in Hungary⁵, and they did not have their representatives in parliament. After elaborating on the position of Hungarians mainly in Czechoslovakia, Romania and

² In 1929 elections Slovaks autonomist Hlinka's Slovak People's Party won 403,680 votes, but The Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants, Communist party and Social democracy gained more than 500,000 votes. BAHNA, Miloslav – KRIVÝ, Vladimír. Ako volili národnosti a konfesie v parlamentných voľbách roku 1929 na Slovensku. Možnosti nových metód ekologickej inferencie. In *Historický časopis*, 2016, Vol. 64, No. 1, pp. 57-85. Online: http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/uploaded/HC_1_2016_Bahna_Krivy_tab8.pdf

³ SZEGHY-GAYER, Veronika. *Felvidékből Szlovenszkó Magyar értelmiségi útkeresések Eperjesen és Kassán a két világháború között*. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2016, pp. 143-155.

⁴ DŮRKOVSKÁ, Mária. Maďarské a nemecké politické strany predmníchovského Československa (Názorové rozdiely v politike Karpatonemeckej a Spišskonemeckej strany a v ich vzťahu voči maďarským politickým stranám). In *Človek a spoločnosť [Individual and Society]*, 2008, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 1-9. <http://www.clovekaspolocnost.sk/sk/rocnik-11-rok-2008/4/studie-a-clanky/maďarske-a-nemecke-politicke-strany-predmnichovskeho-ceskoslovenska-nazorove-rozdiely-v-politike-karpatonemeckej-a-spišskonemeckej-strany-a-v-ich-vztahu-voči-maďarským-politickým-stranam/>

⁵ EILER, Ferenc. Magyarország nemzetiségpolitikája a két világháború között (1918 – 1938). In *Kisebbségkutatás*, 2018, Vol. 21, No.2, pp. 40-67.

Yugoslavia, the author moves his attention onto minorities in Hungary itself – Germans (551,211 or 6.9% of the population) and Jews (473,000 or 5.9% of the population). It may be quite interesting for readers to know what happened in the fall and winter of 1919, when right-wing paramilitary units and enraged mobs murdered between 1,500 and 3,000 Jews and staged more than 60 pogroms. Similarly, it is noted that, as after the Second World War, the end of the first one meant no end to the violence. The author also focuses on the electoral system in Hungary in the 1920s which had: „*become one of the most undemocratic countries in Europe.*“ The last sub-chapter is called *Democratization and minority policy under the shadow of fascism* and this part maps the turbulent period of Hungarian history, and provides the reader with a closer look at this topic. In conclusion, the author highlights some remarkable facts about interwar Hungary and while, yes, in many way it was a unique country from a European and central-European perspective, he does not avoid the Trianon grievances and states that: „*the surviving minorities, such as Jews and Germans, were treated in more or less the same manner as the neighbors treated Hungarians in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Romania*“. So does he mean more or less? This kind of statement is quite below academic writing since he compares three different countries with different political systems (Yugoslavia and Romania were quite similar, but not the same) and laws.

Roland Clark (Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Liverpool, UK) has enriched the book with his chapter *Interwar Romania: Enshrining ethnic privilege*. The chapter opens by looking at the Battle of Mărășești (1917) which presents one of the crucial Romanian myths from the First World War. In the part *Universal male suffrage*, the author in a very comprehensive and sensitive way reflects the building of democracy in Romania during the interwar period, and also the very closely connected phenomenon of elections, political parties and woman's rights. The author combines the development of the Romanian state with several important factors, such as regional differences, the economy and the national question. Clark highlights an interesting fact which had not been typical only for Romania (similarities may be observed in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) that: „*...nation-building in the new provinces was that ethnic Romanians from the Old Kingdom were now in control of the state. Not everyone was enthusiastic about this idea. Bucharest elites saw nation-building projects as ways to raise the level of civilization in the new territories, but Transylvanians perceived this “levelling” as a distinct step down.*“ The author covers another important factor of policy in interwar Romania; religion. The Romanian Orthodox Church was considered as the only official Church in the country: „*The state must not be allowed to become multi-confessional...*“. Apart from the attempts of the Romanian Orthodox Church to dominate, Clark mentions a problem which was not only Romanian but in which every country from the region of central and eastern Europe had to face – anti-Semitism: „*Large numbers of priests joined right-wing and fascist political parties, and senior Church figures attacked Jews in their sermons and writings*“. From my point of view, a very interesting part is where the author reveals the so called “Skoda Affair” which was connected to a Czech armaments company that was contracted to produce weapons for the Romanian army. The sub-chapter *Ethnic cleansing* alludes to the unfortunate era of Romanian history; the extermination, mass killings and pogroms of Jews

mainly in Bessarabia, Transnistria and northern Bukovina. The conclusion outlines 7 points in which the author very sensitively and objectively defines why democracy in Romania failed. Christian Promitzer, who is currently Assistant Professor at the Department for the History of South-eastern Europe (University of Graz) writes a chapter called *Interwar Bulgaria. Populism, authoritarianism, and ethnic minorities*. The beginning of the chapter is devoted to the Bulgarian road to WWI. After chronologising the events during the interwar period, the author puts the focus on each ideological aspect of interwar Bulgarian policy (from both the left and right wings). The author tries to see the problem of „Bulgarian“ fascism in its whole complexity, not just from a methodological point of view but also from a historical perspective as he compares it to other European and mainly eastern European countries. This chapter is very coherent, and provides a clear message to the reader. The author highlights as one of the crucial aspects of Bulgarian history of this period the problem of refugees (250 000 up to 1929 and then from between 300 000 to 500 000).

Stipica Grgić (Assistant Professor at the Department of History, at the University of Zagreb's Department for Croatian Studies) contributes the chapter – *The kingdom of diversity and paternalism: The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, 1918–1941*. The author focuses on the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at the beginning but he omits Corfu and the Niš Declaration, and it seems that the kingdom was created hastily in 1918 without the previous cooperation between Serbian and other Yugoslav elites. The opening looks at the problems of the newly-created country (the national question, education, health, industry etc.). In the sub-chapter called *The political panopticon of the parliamentary period (1919 – 1928)*, the author evaluates in basic terms the most powerful political parties in Yugoslavia during this era. As seen from the text, the situation in Yugoslavia was very complicated, which created the basis for the change which had to come. King Aleksandar abolished the Vidovdan Constitution, dissolved parliament, and formed a government headed by General Petar Živković, Grgić touches on one of the core problems of the state after establishment of Kingdom of Yugoslavia – failed yugoslavism...: „*The dictatorship tried to construct a unified nation primarily by a reliance on the army, police, and educational and cultural bodies, such as the Sokol youth gymnastic movement, at the same time overhauling the curriculum in the elementary schools and suppressing the traditional names of Yugoslavia's regions – Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia*“. As we now can see, this created more space for conflicts. This chapter presents a solid basis for the history of Yugoslavia during the interwar period. The reader may find the subchapter *Economic and demographic problems* more interesting by giving greater insight into the topic.

Interwar Albania is the chapter written by Bernd J. Fischer – Professor Emeritus of History at Indiana University/Purdue University, Indiana. The author states at the beginning: „*The Peace of Paris, which ended the war, left Albania truncated with fully half of its population in the newly constructed Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes*“. In Albania approximately 800000 Albanians lived and in Yugoslavia 439 657 (according to table 7.1, the Population of Yugoslavia by ethnicity in Yugoslavia). However, I believe that the Albanian nation consisted of around 1 200 000 people so half of a nation should be around 600 000, therefore his

estimation may seem quite ambiguous. Later, the author describes the difficult road of Albanians from the war and the rise of a new political figure Ahmet Zogu. This part is very readable, and it is full of interesting information concerning the topic. I would suggest that the author could divide the text into subchapters as the previous authors did. Moreover, this chapter lacks any other aspects of „democracy failure“ as provided by the previous authors as social, economic, foreign etc. It is simply the rise of Ahmet Zogu's to power (and descriptions of his political steps and evaluation of his policies) and it does not cover the whole interwar period. The ninth and final chapter of the book by Robert Bideleux is devoted to the peasantry and peasant parties in East Central Europe, which the author sees as „*the most distinctive, interesting, and constructive political and social movements that gradually expanded and “matured” in most parts of East Central Europe*“. This chapters is really inspiring because the author has chosen one particular aspect and follows it in a detailed way (with many important dates, tables from 9.1 to 9.16). The part “*The Green Rising*”: *the rise of East Central European peasant parties, 1900s – 1930s* evaluates political parties which grew from the peasantry, as such. This chapter provides the most inspiring part of the book from my point of view. Finally, Stefano Bianchini contributes to the book with some thoughts in *Afterwords*.

The book is untypical for a collective monograph of such type – each chapter has a different methodology and quality. From an overall point of view, it may fulfil its goal and explain to the reader why democracy failed in each country of the region, but on a different level and via different aspects, it may be confusing, sometimes. Although as whole the book may serve those interested in the interwar period as a basic survey, one must take into account the different approach of each author, and what may be applicable to Hungary may not be to Albania. I would appreciate an effort by the authors to shine more light on the period of our European history so crucial for the whole 20th and 21st centuries.

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