Book Review


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“Legacies can be amplified or diminished, projected, twisted, suppressed, denied, celebrated, or mourned, but they are nevertheless omnipresent”, reads one of the introductory sentences (2) in the captivating volume edited by Baláz Apor and John Paul Newman. Recently, this statement found horrific confirmation in Vladimir Putin’s manipulation of both Lenin’s and the broader Soviet legacy during the “lectures” he delivered as a prelude to the aggression against Ukraine. Individuals’ perceptions are shaped simultaneously by their own generational, class, cultural, and other backgrounds; and, as further evidenced by the case of Ukraine, those factors can quickly result in conflicting attitudes even within individual families. In sometimes ironic, but often tragically absurd ways, the historical legacies of both short-lived and long-lasting conflicts and revolutions of the twentieth century remain omnipresent.

In the collection ambitiously composed by Apor and Newman, historical legacies are not understood as rigorously as in the terms defined by Jason Wittenberg;1 in fact, both the editors and the majority of the authors of the individual chapters rely on a somewhat more vague definition, provided by Maria Todorova.2 The author of the seminal Imagining the Balkans distinguishes between tradition, understood as a process of evaluation and conscious selection from a pool of ideas, and events, phenomena that the past leaves behind, while historical legacy represents the totality of past experiences, “the pool itself”, as paraphrased by Apor and Newman (3).

Tapping this vast reservoir of legacies of conflict and of state socialism as a prime ideological experiment in twentieth century Europe is, inevitably, an exercise in selection, but one that provides an incredibly diverse range of examples.

which—with the exception of Kosovo, neglected here—are also evenly geographically distributed. As the title of the volume indicates, the majority of the discussions revolve around two overriding concerns, i.e. the legacies of the Second World War and of state socialism—a special feature of this part of Europe being that these two topoi are inseparably intertwined, as for example the contributions related to Croatia (by Vjeran Pavlaković) and Albania (by Matthias Bickert and Iris Vorps) aptly demonstrate.

The legacies of war and socialism are addressed in nine chapters within the first three sections titled “Legacies of War”, “Politics and the Legacies of Communism”, and “Everyday Legacies of Communism”. The last two sections, “Noncommunist Legacies” and “Entangled Legacies, Minorities, and Out-Groups”, may appear only loosely integrated into the concept of the book, but in terms of the “alchemy” of left-wing and right-wing elements clearly observable in some postsocialist countries—another point underlined by the editors (7)—they are revealed as markedly important for a better understanding of the “unpredictable mixing of memories of war, nationalism, and dictatorship that constitutes an important legacy of the twentieth century in Southeastern Europe” (8). Furthermore, they provide the key to understanding what Mitja Velikonja has called “secondary nostalgia”3 and other phenomena simultaneously rooted in the socialist past and postsocialist present. In the context of the political, social, and cultural problems in which Southeastern Europe remains caught up, the authors, as expected, pay attention mainly to the problematic legacies, i.e. those which have hindered the development of liberal democracy for the last 30 years. Nevertheless, after reading all the chapters, the question arises as to whether certain elements that could be labeled emancipatory and progressive could be drained from that “pool” of legacies, which was sometimes also filled with experimental ideological streams not entirely at odds with democratic principles, such as practices associated with Yugoslav self-management and non-aligned internationalism.

The majority of the contributions are related to and complement the growing body of literature on the culture of everyday life, remembrance studies, and the politics of representation in Southeastern Europe. The last section especially offers fresh approaches by introducing topics otherwise rarely represented in studies of socialism. These afford an insight into how the original ideological tenants of socialism or related inherited sets of (nationalist) values influenced, for instance, the identity choices of Burgenland Croats in the cross-border area between Austria, Hungary, and Slovakia, or how the residues of eugenicist notions of a “good life” still affect the process of othering in relation to the Roma and people with disabilities

throughout Southeastern Europe. Moreover, the book has additional reflective value in its discussion of recent performance art installations related to traumatic legacies, placing this volume among the growing number of studies that are gradually expanding the field of classic, monodisciplinary historiographic or ethnographic analysis by encompassing cultural studies. A certain disproportion between the individual chapters, however, both in terms of scope and the depth of analysis and elaboration, interferes with the editors’ overall effort to embrace and consider a vast panoply of historical experiences from the viewpoint of different disciplines.

Among the most pertinent chapters is undoubtedly that by Marietta Stankova, who deals with the legacy of Georgi Dimitrov in Bulgaria. She proposes interpreting the “footprint” left after the demolition of the former Stalinist leader’s mausoleum in Sofia in 1999 as a metaphor for the place that communism occupies in the Bulgarian collective consciousness. Nevertheless, when determining causal relationships between legacy as an “aftereffect of an antecedent cause that no longer operates”, as Wittenberg defines this notion in his above mentioned article (370), and the present, we should generally remain wary of unequivocal conclusions. As Wittenberg reminds us, not all postsocialist phenomena should be assumed to have originated in the period before 1989; rather, some could be attributed to a greater degree to the hardships of “Europeanisation”.

In this light, the introduction to Balkan Legacies makes a bold claim: that the postsocialist era is largely over. One of the authors however, citing Polish sociologist Marek Ziółkowski, states that the “trauma” of citizens of the former communist countries will persist for a timespan of two generations. Together with the legacies of World War II, this experience will in fact continue to shape the perceptions of people living in the area under study, which once more resembles Milan Kundera’s “uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany”. Yet, the constant practice of attaching newer legacies to older ones suggests that the processes analysed in Apor and Newman’s collection are open-ended and subject to continual reassessment. As the authors of the chapter on commemorating socialist cultural heritage in Albania underline, further research must bear in mind that the former communist countries cannot and will not automatically follow a mutant stereotype along Western lines.