

Connelly, John: From Peoples into Nations. A History of Eastern Europe.

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In close to a thousand pages John Connelly's new history recounts roughly two centuries of East-Central and Southeastern European history since 1800. The book's comprehensive narrative is punctuated by Connelly's lively observations as well as with telling details and illustrative anecdotes. Connelly is a beloved teacher at the University of California at Berkeley as well as an internationally respected scholar for his published work on Eastern Europe in the twentieth century. Despite the book's virtues – its author's remarkable knowledge of a region he has long studied – readers may feel uncertain about Connelly's ultimate purpose. Although he clearly disagrees with some recent interpretations of the region's history, he rarely uses the fascinating examples he cites to build alternate arguments. Rather, those examples serve more to illustrate a relatively traditional political narrative that focuses largely on the politics of nationalism and ideas about nationhood.

Connelly sets the tone for the book with a provocative opening remark. Referring to Gavrilo Princip's aim on June 28, 1914, to "bring about a South Slav state," he asks: "where did the idea come from that salvation would flow from a state of the South Slavs? Such a thing had never existed in history. The answer lies in philosophy. German philosophy" (p. 5) and especially with Johann Gottfried Herder's ideas

about language and culture. This observation anchors Connelly's narrative. Asking what makes the history of Eastern Europe fundamentally different from the history of the rest of Europe, Connelly points to Eastern Europe's small nations and their obsessive relationship to nationalism and national survival. In no other part of Europe, he argues, did the existential fears of linguistic or cultural extinction particular to small nations shape politics so profoundly. Given Connelly's narrative, it is hard not to agree with him, although one could equally point to the similar character of several western nationalisms as well – Irish, Basque, Flemish, Finnish, or Catalan nationalisms – during the same period.

Connelly's narrative foregrounds accounts of and by political activists and ideologists. In many cases his political focus offers sharp insights about the beliefs, decisions, and career trajectories of important nationalist figures. If this strikes readers as a familiar framework, Connelly does not, however, engage in a triumphalist narrative of nationhood. He is unsparing in attributing many of the horrors of twentieth-century history to nationalism's power in East Central Europe. Nonetheless, somewhat ironically, this approach tells us less about the "peoples" that became "nations". For example, when Connelly brings social or economic developments into the account, they usually function to reinforce arguments about the popularity or failure of a nationalist political figure, movement, or government. Connelly also offers surprisingly little analysis of the specific meanings of nationhood to the local followers of leaders who engaged in nationalist appeals. For example, in a chapter titled "Insurgent Nationalism in Serbia and Poland", itself an interesting comparison, Connelly documents the importance of epic folk poetry to the popularization of Serb nationalism. Of early nineteenth-century Serbia Connelly writes, "The fact of foreign domination rankled in the local population." (p. 144) This "rankling" is reiterated and commemorated in folk poetry. But what meanings did Serbs attach to these examples? Was it the "foreignness" of their Ottoman rulers that rankled the peasants, or the rapacious practices of local janissaries? Were the two necessarily understood as the same thing, and how were the linkages constructed? Similarly, regarding the attempted Polish national uprising in Galicia in 1846 Connelly ultimately discounts peasant loyalty to the Habsburg Emperor. And when he writes that "The German-speaking occupiers seemed less alien than the landowners of their own ethnicity" (p. 137) I wondered why the language spoken by "alien occupiers" should have mattered more to downtrodden peasants than their treatment at the hands of the hated gentry who happened to speak the same language?

Not only is society often missing from this account, but also empire. Connelly devotes considerable attention to the rearguard struggles of the Habsburg Empire against the rising tides of nationalism. But it is a reactive kind of attention that highlights haphazard imperial responses to the nationalist activists who are his subjects and not the state and its structures and practices that may also have fostered elements of political nationalism. The German philosophy to which Connelly attributes the rise of ideas about nationhood may have been influential for activist intellectuals. But were Habsburg imperial practices that fostered – often unintentionally – vernacular language-use ultimately more effective at turning language-based arguments about community into politically effective claims? One cannot demand everything

of a single author, but we could pose similar questions about practices dealing with confessional or linguistic difference in the Ottoman or Romanov Empires as well, and it is a pity that Connelly's narrative does not open the possibility of such comparisons.

In the case of nationalism and empire, it would have also been interesting had Connelly engaged the kinds of arguments made by historian Dominique K. Reill in two books, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation. Adriatic Multinationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (2012) and *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (2020).¹ In the first, Reill examined precisely the intellectual activists that are Connelly's subjects. In 1848, however, Reill's activists actively questioned whether an Italian nation state offered the best political solution for Italian speakers in the Adriatic region. When it came to Trieste, they made compelling arguments to maintain its place in a multi-national state. Nationalism did not demand a single clear outcome. More importantly, Reill's subsequent book on post-1918 Fiume argued that the privileges conferred on Fiume by its place in a multinational and globally connected empire conditioned Fiumians' understanding of their post-war future. Much of what might be interpreted as rabid Italian nationalism resulted from a conscious choice made by both Italian and Croatian Fiumians alike, to maintain Fiume's global traditions by attaching it to another empire, in this case to Italy. These arguments about nationhood and empire could apply equally well to other sites in post-war east-central Europe, from Upper Silesia to Carinthia to Transylvania.

My concern for the more local meanings of nationhood also extends to Connelly's reasons for discounting ideas about national indifference in the history of the region. The historians who used indifference to understand the local and situational significance of nationalism never posited it as a clear political *alternative* to nationalism, as Connelly suggests. Instead, they elaborated it as a strategic way out of the inexorable nationalist logic that has long dominated the history of this region. They sought to investigate what exactly nationalism had meant – or had *not* meant – in people's daily lives and in different situations. Most of their theorizing grew out of the observation that while nationalism had certainly dominated the formal realm of politics, it often lost its emotive and explanatory power in more micro-historical studies of the quotidian. How to explain this apparent gap between occasionally powerful passions raised by nationalist rhetoric and its frequent irrelevance to daily life? Tara Zahra argued compellingly in *Kidnapped Souls* (2008)², for example, that in Bohemia, nationalist radicalization was caused precisely by competition among nationalists for the indifferent. If the indifferent were largely irrelevant, why did they play such a large role in the imaginations of nationalists? Others have also argued that the nationalist radicalism we see by 1900 was neither a product of conflicts among eth-

¹ Reill, Dominique Kirchner: *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation. Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice*. Stanford/California 2012; Reill, *The Fiume crisis. Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire*. Cambridge/Massachusetts, London 2020.

² Zahra, Tara: *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948*. Ithaca/New York, London 2018.

nic groups, nor an effort to intimidate national opponents, but rather an effort to discipline the members of national community itself. All these possibilities remain viable in Connelly's account, but he barely addresses them.

My review has concentrated on Connelly's treatment of the period up to 1918. The rest of the book, however, maintains the same focus. There are definite high-points in the account, especially Connelly's careful analysis of the Holocaust in East Central Europe, an analysis that repeatedly examines the complex relationship between the Jews of the region and perceptions about their relationship to nationhood. Here suddenly, Connelly succeeds remarkably in explaining how local meanings of nationhood may have engaged with policies and practices imposed by Nazi or later Soviet occupiers.

It bears mention that the book is large in part because it rests on an impressive range of secondary and primary source literature in several languages. Yet for that very reason, the book occasionally perplexes. Despite Connelly's broad source base, one wonders why the book avoids addressing some of the more interesting recent interpretations of the region's history? Why so little inclusion of newer work dealing with culture or gender, not to mention society and economy? There is most definitely much to admire in this book, but for this reader, a lingering sense of missed opportunities remains.