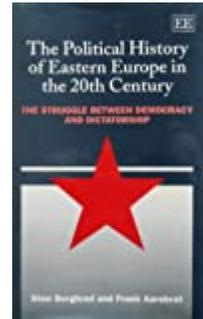




Sten Berglund, Frank Aarebrot. *The Political History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century: The Struggle Between Democracy and Dictatorship.* Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, Mass.: Edward Elgar, 1997. xi + 196 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85898-478-0.



Reviewed by Padraic Kenney (University of Colorado)

Published on HABSBERG (December, 1997)

Eastern Europe Without the Color

So is this our eastern Europe—dried out and stretched upon a social scientist’s two-by-two grid? Readers of HABSBERG, we who have been drawn to the field by, and impart to our students, the stories of colorful characters and events of the region’s history, will find none of that in this survey of the twentieth century by two Scandinavian political scientists. There is no Pilsudski, no King Carol and his mistress, no Holocaust (or Jews, either), no Tito, no Theater of the Magic Lantern. This may be the wave of the future, as eastern European countries become ordinary candidates for dissertations in comparative politics. For other reasons, however, teachers of modern eastern European History would do well to read this short survey. A severely revised edition would even do well as an undergraduate text.

Sten Berglund’s and Frank Aarebrot’s focus on “the struggle between democracy and dictatorship” is an ideal approach to the political history of the region. Focusing primarily on three moments—the building of nation states out of imperial ruins after World War I, the imposition of Stalinist order after World War II, and the “transition” of 1989-90—they attempt to determine why

democracy has failed and dictatorship triumphed in the past, and whether the former has any chance of survival today.

Three problems should be noted at the outset: first, while their treatment of the region does seem to reflect knowledge of recent research, a startlingly high proportion of footnotes and references are to a few works: a 1994 compilation of rather superficial surveys of the 1989 transitions of which one of the authors was a co-editor [1]; and two lesser-known surveys of recent east European history.[2] There is even a citation (on Romania) to the Microsoft *Encarta* encyclopedia. It would be gratuitous to list the dozens of works which one would expect serious scholars to have consulted, and which would not simply have added information, but changed the authors’ understanding of events in the region as well.

Second, a book with an undergraduate-sized bibliography could still make its way into the classroom were it not for a few simply incredible errors of fact. It is difficult to get exercised over the minor mistakes inevitable in a work ranging across so many countries and cultures; but can one take seriously a book which asserts *five times*

that Solidarity won “official recognition by the communist regime in the summer of 1979” (p. 78)? Or that Czechoslovakia broke up in 1991 (chapter 5)? Again, it would be gratuitous to hunt out further errors in this work [3]; one can only wish that the publishers had subjected the manuscript to the minimal editing which would surely have brought a substantial return on their investment.

Third, this book does not cover “Eastern Europe.” Inexplicably, the authors leave out Yugoslavia in each of their country-by-country surveys, though its component parts show up in most tables. This resurrection of the “Soviet Bloc” makes utterly no sense if one purports to survey the struggle between democracy and dictatorship.

Having surely condemned this book to oblivion in the eyes of most HABSBURG readers, I would like nonetheless to take it seriously on its own terms: do the theoretical approaches taken hold up? In large part, they do; at the least, they are provocative and deserving of consideration.

In the first short chapter, “The Heritage,” Berglund and Aarebrot consider the differing impacts of empire, nationalism, and modernization on the emerging states. Here the reader encounters the first of many grids which eastern Europe can be made to fit. One example should serve to indicate both the advantages and the disadvantages of such a method. Figure 1.3 (p. 12) is entitled “A framework for understanding nationalist movements within the empires.” The horizontal axis, “The territorial challenge,” divides movements into those derived from the Austrian or Prussian empire states (“Alternative state formation”) and those “Interface territories” (?) which devolve from the “historical empires,” Russia and the Ottoman Empire; the vertical axis, “The national concept,” categorizes movement goals further into “Homogeneous population: The Volksstaat model,” “Strong core population, but including subject minorities: The Staatsvolk model,” and “Ethnically based new national empires: Substantial subject populations.”

No doubt a scholar of each nation might find something to question in the way national movements are defined and placed on this grid; Berglund and Aarebrot would respond (and I think rightly) that the model itself is what matters, and that to quibble whether a nation belongs in this or that box misses the point. The categories seem to me to introduce more confusion than they resolve, but this seems to the good; for example, Romanian and Serbian national movements are separated into their original ideas (Volksstaat and Staatsvolk, re-

spectively) and their eventual territorial claims which the authors call “ethnically based new national empires.” The distinction between the types of empires is also helpful. Simply because the authors do not trouble themselves with distinctions between religious traditions, or the role of literacy, or classes, or the strategies devised by national figures, they are able to categorize in ways which might (with a little translation and the lecturer’s “color commentary”) prove enlightening to the intelligent undergraduate trying to make sense of the enormous range of experiences in the region.

On the other hand, the virtual disappearance of agency—for example, the lack of mention of debates over the proper road to nation within Congress Poland—gives one pause. The authors’ belated and brief attention to social structure is but partial compensation; they argue for attention to the peasantry as a “revolutionary force” in the first three decades of the twentieth century (p. 16), but do not follow this suggestive point. Without rigorous attention to culture and society in the realm of politics, it is difficult to chart political legacies.[4]

It is a pity that the chapter on the interwar period is so brief (18 pp.), but Berglund and Aarebrot manage to make some provocative points. Their argument is essentially that democracy succeeded in interwar Europe in those countries which are generally secular and based upon “The Charlemagne heritage” (Figure 2.4, p. 30) of Roman law; the two exceptions, Germany (where democracy failed) and Ireland (where it survived), are explained by the extent to which social elites (including possible ethnic or class competitors) are co-opted into a pluralist political system. This factor also helps to explain why Czechoslovak democracy could survive.

Interestingly, the authors are drawn to the paradoxical conclusion that these factors are of little help in understanding the fate of democracy after 1945: secularization and elite co-optation (“clientelism, kinship, and corruption” (p. 37)) were central features of communist states; and, one might add, did not come hand-in-hand with the rule of law. What of pre-World War II traditions does make a difference, then? There is, surprisingly, no consideration of the war itself as a factor reshaping (or dooming) the chances for democracy.

Berglund and Aarebrot are less interested in tracing long-term continuities and gradual change than they are in paths taken at moments of political change. Controversially—but with success—they argue that the establishment of communist power after 1945 was such a moment. They take Lenin’s recipe for revolution—war,

hardship, and inter-elite conflicts plus a strong revolutionary party—and point out that eastern European countries generally lacked the last of these. They are careful, in other words, to distinguish the obvious role of the Red Army from that of native communists. This is a useful approach, the kind which perhaps only the dispassionate social scientist can develop. However, it leads the authors into a rather sterile argument focusing almost entirely on inter-party rivalries. The story of how independent parties were eliminated one-by-one from the political arena is important, but is that all that the road from (putative) democracy to dictatorship entails? Where are popular desires for order or for diversity, fueled by memories of war and of pre-war politics? At the very least, one would expect analysis along the lines of Charles Gati's well-known dissection of the Hungarian election of 1945.[5]

The unfortunate result of this focus on structure is that Berglund and Aarebrot rather overstate the chances for democracy after 1945. Structurally, they are probably right, and this story is one which any historian would do well to recognize; even leaving aside the intentions of the Soviets, however, one must wonder whether the will for democracy and the experience with democratic practice existed among voters and politicians alike. How can one call Romania in 1945, for example, an "emerging pluralist democracy" (p. 62)? It is precisely the realm of desire, memory, and practice which, if added to the authors' models, would significantly sharpen their analysis—and probably tell us something valuable about the democratic potential in eastern Europe.

Turning to the communist era, the authors come down squarely on the totalitarian side of the definitional debate; only Poland and Hungary in the 1980s, they assert, can be considered even authoritarian (pp. 75-7). Their handling of this question is excellent; one can disagree with their classifications (as does this reviewer), but unlike most totalitarianists, they are able to use the definitions to point out significant differences between communist regimes.

One wishes that the authors had devoted serious attention to the protests against communist rule; one could hardly ask for a better laboratory to determine whether "democracy" had a chance before 1989—and whether it was even desired. While the authors assert in a title that "Politics Did Matter, Even There and Then" (p. 97), their interest in the problem of protest is restricted to an enigmatic table quantifying protest incidents in each country to 1977 (p. 98). Their lack of knowledge about protest and

resistance leads to the simply indefensible summation on p. 102:

in retrospect it is somehow mind-boggling that it did not take more time to undo what had been built over almost half a century. The implication is, of course, that the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe had much less diffuse support and much less legitimacy and relied on repression to a much larger extent than had been generally assumed in the West.

Let us leave aside the question of resistance and support; this is a topic which has only just begun to be explored with any depth, and the authors are merely proposing a hypothesis. But the idea that a half-century of communism was undone in six months is beyond credibility. If "communism" is simply the state and party, then it is a wonder it lasted at all; as any observer of contemporary eastern Europe is aware, "communism" understood as a bureaucratic system, an approach to economic planning, and attitudes to justice, public participation, property, and individual vs. collective responsibilities, has taken far longer to dismantle. Moreover, the dismantling process certainly began far earlier in Poland and Hungary, as the authors seem to be aware.

Berglund and Aarebrot's principal contribution to the question of the communist legacy is the provocative, and potentially powerful, argument that the communist regimes may actually have prepared their societies and states for democracy. After all, they point out, secularization, education, and industrialization/urbanization seem to be important to the success of democracy; these were also goals, generally attained, of the communist regimes. This is not an idea which they develop (and it leads them into bizarre conclusions, such as that Albania is well-prepared for democracy; see p. 165, and Figure 6.4, p. 172), yet if taken seriously, this suggestion ought to revolutionize the way we think about the communist era and post-revolutionary societies.

Surprisingly, Berglund and Aarebrot have least to say that is of interest when they reach the post-revolutionary (they would say post-transition) period. The promising themes of secularization, urbanization, and education disappear. There is no examination of the rhetoric of church and state, or of city management and local politics, or of the changing meanings of professional training or the position of the intellectual. Instead, we have a summary of the data closest to hand: election results and Eurobarometer polls. These are nice bits of information, but what do they mean? If Albanians and Britons express an equally low concern with democracy in their respec-

tive countries (Figure 6.4), could this mean they understand “democracy” in different ways? A year after the poll cited, after all, the same Albanians joined in the nationwide unrest after the collapse of pyramid schemes.

The misunderstanding of culture is once again apparent as the authors look to the future. Their concern, logically enough, is with “cleavages” in society and how they are handled. But national and religious differences are simply assumed to be problems, regardless of whether traditions in a particular country might lead one to expect problems. “Understanding these roots (of national cleavages) is the key to understanding the challenges to democratic ideals,” they argue (p. 173). Is this true? A “cleavage” for the authors is simply the existence of a minority; it is enough to show that a country has minorities—that it “deviate(s) from the dominant secular state model and/or from the nation-state model” (p. 177)—to issue stern warnings about the threat to democracy. Yet surely the question is how such differences are handled. This was the point of the model-building in the chapter on the interwar years, and one looks in vain for it at the end. Do education, democratic experience in urban areas, or secular traditions help states to resolve potential cleavages and maintain democracy? Berglund and Aarebrot could have answered these questions, and it is a pity that they choose not to.

This book should be read, but read with caution. I cannot imagine what students would make of eastern Europe were they to read this book first. It does not really sound like an interesting place. But that was not the purpose of this book, and the approach here is well justified. While a clearer understanding of culture and society would have helped the authors’ understanding of many issues like nationalism (or democracy, for that matter), their focus on historical structures and the state is a welcome change. If nothing else, the radically different

approach forces one to rethink approaches to the study of eastern Europe; every reader is likely to find insights which can clarify treatment of important junctures in the drama we know so well.

Notes

[1]. Sten Berglund and Jan Ake Dellenbrant, eds., *The New Democracies in Eastern Europe: Party Systems and Political Cleavages*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot, UK: E. Elgar, 1994). The depth of this volume can be gauged by the fact that most of the contributors handle two country essays each.

[2]. Ben Fowkes, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1995); Roger East, *Revolutions in Eastern Europe* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1992). Another frequently-cited source of historical (as opposed to geographical) information is Richard Crampton and Ben Crampton, *Atlas of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[3]. One more curiosity (if not mistake): I was surprised to read that Poland has expressed interest in the Kaliningrad region since 1991 (p. 135, n. 6). The authors provide no documentation for this unlikely assertion.

[4]. Readers will no doubt think of the approach to this period used by Gale Stokes in his “The Social Origins of East European Politics,” recently reprinted in Stokes, *Three Eras of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36-66.

[5]. Charles Gati, “Modernization and Communist Power in Hungary,” *East European Quarterly* 5:3 (1971), 325-59.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Padraic Kenney. Review of Berglund, Sten; Aarebrot, Frank, *The Political History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century: The Struggle Between Democracy and Dictatorship*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. December, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1554>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.