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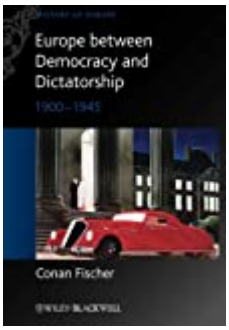

Conan Fischer. *Europe between Democracy and Dictatorship: 1900 - 1945.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. xii + 395 pp. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-21511-0; $44.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-21512-7.

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The Historiography of Crises in Modern Europe and the "Crisis" of Modern European Historiography

The proliferation of textbooks dealing with modern Europe feels relentless, especially when it comes to the first half of the twentieth century. And yet, one is hard-pressed to recommend a single volume to undergraduates looking for a comprehensive, reasonably sophisticated study that is also short, readable, and balanced. Even the most detailed general works lack full geographical coverage of the continent, and their thematic scope tends to be just as limited. The 1930s continue to attract the greatest attention. In one of the latest British surveys, the decade is described as âa time with few heroes, two evil Titans, and an assortment of villains, and knaves.â[1] The author, Zara Steiner, hastens to add that she takes no pleasure in their company. One would assume that her sentiments are widely shared. Nevertheless, historians, for all their revulsion towards dictators and other unsavory characters, are still strongly drawn to this epoch, and to the dark side of European history. The fascination with âthe successive waves of darkness that enveloped the continent some two generations agoâ (p. 6) shows no sign of abating. Well-worn tropes like âthe triumph of the darkâ and âthe dark continentâ may irk reviewers, but do not seem to deter a student readership.

Despite talk of an impending crisis in academic publishing, the market for textbooks on modern Europe remains as buoyant as ever; the plentiful supply does not appear to outstrip demand. Whilst varying considerably in length and depth, most surveys, whether they discuss the whole period until 1945 or only the interwar years, follow the same time-honored traditions. They focus on western European security, with particular reference to France and Germany; they treat eastern Europe separately, and in many cases merely fleetingly; and rather than offering a new interpretation of events, they repeat much of the established grand narrative with just a few colorful additions and small corrections from the authorsâ own field of research. The dominant themes are dictatorship, democracy, the Holocaust, revolutions, wars, the League of Nations, and the origins of European integration.

Europe between Democracy and Dictatorship: 1900-

1945 is a typical example of âconventional and central narrativesâ (p. 330). Notwithstanding its special emphasis on two states, it gives an outline of twentieth-century European history with a strong western slant. The book covers Franco-German relations in detail, with specific regard to economic factors. Conan Fischer traces cooperation by French and German businesses back to the years before the First World War, and links this episode of European integration to the theme of the Franco-German alliance after 1945, âthe bedrock on which the European Union restsâ (p. 329). Accordingly, the issue of the Rhineland keeps cropping up in the prewar and interwar chapters alike. The reader will find some expert analysis of the Ruhr crisis, too, including its impact on international relations. Arguing that the available literature âdisguised the enormity of French objectivesâ (p. 156), Fischer calls the Ruhr crisis âa defining episode in the history of interwar Europeâ (p. 157). In chapter 5, probably the most specialist part of the text, concerned with the decade from 1919 to 1929, the author puts forward the thesis that the Weimar Republic had been so gravely weakened in 1923 that it became âill-placed to cope with the challenges of the Great Depression less than a decade laterâ (p. 166). Whether or not one accepts this line of reasoning, Fischer is effective in trying to convince the reader of the long-term importance of the Franco-German conflict. True to his word, he brings in his own perspectives and enthusiasms, âlaying a degree of emphasis and sometimes a revisionist take on the international diplomacy of a turbulent and warlike ageâ (p. xi).

Unfortunately, controversial points and original nuggets are few and far between in the authorâs discussion of the 1930s and the two world wars. Although extensive geographical and thematic coverage of European affairs is provided, the material is uneven, notably when it touches upon central and eastern Europe, and when it goes beyond the narrow confines of diplomatic history. To his credit, Fischer devotes a lengthy section to cultural matters and Europeâs âcontested modernityâ (pp. 187-198). He also examines important economic subjects, from reparations to the Great Depression. Indeed, the book contains clear, concise explanations of key economic problems in the interwar period, which some undergraduates may find particularly useful. These diversions, informative as they are, contribute little to the main thrust of the book, namely the shift from democracy to dictatorship between the wars.

The treatment of eastern European history is especially patchy, and is not devoid of inaccuracies either. The misspelling of the Serbian festival of Vidovdan as âVivovdanâ (p. 10) or, in four mentions of a Hungarian statesman, of the surname KÃ¡rolyi as âKÃ¡rolyÃ®â (p. 119) may only be minor typos. However, the assertion that âthe Nazis overran Hungary during the closing monthsâ (p. 265) of the Second World War is grossly misleading, as the German forces occupied Hungary in March 1944, and held out for more than a year before retreating to Austria. The claim that JÃ³zef PiÅsudskiâs âregime was among the less oppressiveâ (p. 264) in eastern Europe is disputable, given that it was one of the first dictatorships to emerge in the region. The label of âmilitary rulerâ (p. 264) applied to Admiral Horthy is questionable, too. Likewise, it is scarcely appropriate to describe the Czechs and Slovaks as âconfederatesâ (p. 276). Ruthenia was not âceded to Hungaryâ (p. 276), but was occupied by the Hungarian army. The brief account of how, in 1944, the Red Army âstruck southwestwards during August and September, forcing Romania and Bulgaria out of the warâ (p. 319) is highly ambiguous, as it obscures the fact that Romania successfully switched sides, and that Bulgaria was not even at war with the Soviet Union. The statement that the Allied leaders, whilst meeting in Yalta, âagreed in effect to partition Europeâ (p. 320) is at best a tired old clichÃ© of Cold War literature, since the fate of eastern Europe was already sealed prior to the gathering in the Crimea. Of course, such simplifications are difficult to avoid when employing a shorthand style of writing European history. Be that as it may, the imbalance in the text is plain to see. It is symptomatic that in the chapter entitled âThe High Noon of the Dictators,â each of the subsections on France, Italy, and Iberia is longer than the subsection on eastern Europe. That half of the continent should be treated separately, as an appendix to the story, is a telling detail.

Overall, this book may be useful for students who are seeking a succinct introduction to European history from 1900 to 1945, and for those interested in Franco-German relations. That said, it is not a marked improvement on other recent volumes targeting the same market.

Note

[1]. Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

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