

Sergio Romano. *An Outline of European History from 1789 to 1989*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999. 183 pp. \$27.97 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-076-2.



Reviewed by Paul Doerr (Department of History, Acadia University)

Published on H-W-Civ (October, 1999)

The Nation-State in European History

The title of this slim volume by Sergio Romano, former Italian diplomat turned journalist and historian, does a disservice to the contents. Far from being an “outline”, Romano’s book fits into the mould of an analytical essay dealing with the tumultuous history of the nation state in Europe since the French Revolution. Romano has little new to add to the story (he thinks that historians seldom ask innovative questions), but the events of 1989 left him (and many others) wondering why one part of Europe appears “to be returning to the very nationalism that was twice the cause of its own destruction”. This serves as the justification for writing the book.

As with many before him, Romano identifies the French Revolution as the source of modern European nationalism. Fired by patriotic fervour as they swept across the continent, French revolutionary armies, followed by those of Napoleon, stirred nationalist backlashes everywhere in Europe. The Congress of Vienna did not and could not turn the clock back to 1788: rather the diplomats made an accommodation with the new nationalism. The revolutions of 1830 and 1848 were too superficial and hesitant to succeed, but they did throw enough of a fright

into the European dynasties to prompt a search for legitimacy. They found legitimacy and popular appeal by co-opting nationalism, a process mastered by those authoritarian reformers Napoleon III and Otto von Bismarck.

But a Europe built on nationalism became steadily less governable. Although Romano rejects the theory that colonialism contributed to World War One, he does point out that nation states were increasingly obliged to act as great powers, which often meant pursuing an aggressive foreign policy. All felt incomplete and threatened by others. The Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman empires, obviously, were seen to be outdated and dangerous by 1914.

Prosecuting war took on hysterical aspects during the First World War. The enemy was given attributes of absolute evil, so compromise peace became impossible as the war progressed. The desperation of the Entente powers to obtain the support of the United States meant that they had to adopt Wilson’s version of national self-determination. Many suspected that applying national self-determination would prove impossible, and they were not disappointed. The successor states were

riddled with internal divisions and border disputes. Although nominally victorious, Italy emerged from the war with a profound sense of frustrated nationalism. Out-raged nationalism of course reached a pinnacle in post-war Germany. Fascism and Nazism were the logical outcomes. In the USSR, meanwhile, Stalin's "fake federalism" and the "new Soviet man" offered an alternative to the Europe of Versailles. By 1939 the Europe of nationalities was out of control. Victory in the Second World War could have meaning only if "the principle of nationality" were uprooted. Roosevelt wanted a Europe that could be governed by a "global condominium" of powers, while Stalin sought to export the Soviet ideology. Both rejected nationalism.

For much of the post-war period nationalism in Europe was thus "repressed" in favour of "ideological empires". Western Europe was held together by the values of individual freedom and the superiority of the market. Eastern Europe swore allegiance to the building of "socialism". The failure of the Soviet "experiment" has led, apparently, to a return to the Europe of Versailles. But Romano does not despair. Members of the European Union have long since surrendered large measures of their sovereignty, while the rejuvenated nation-states of Eastern Europe are clamouring to surrender their sovereignty to NATO and/or the EU. The nation-state, Romano concludes, has shrunk before his eyes.

Such is the gist of a interesting and reasonably sophisticated argument. Again much of this is not new, but Romano has a talent for putting a twist on his con-

clusions that prompt readers to stop and think. One of the most useful portions of the book can be found in his chapter on the revolutions of 1848, where Romano reminds us just how meaningless the concept of nationality must have seemed for rural inhabitants of Sicily or Brittany. Although the translation can be choppy, and there are a number of misprints, the book makes for an interesting read. Unfortunately the author has chosen to dispense with the usual apparatus of a scholarly study. The book has no footnotes and precisely 26 entries in a very select "Select Bibliography".

On the negative side, I must say that this book had a fairly high "cringe ratio". At times it seemed that for every insight, the author came up with an equivalent-sized dud. In his chapter on World War Two for example, he assures us that the Axis powers gained their most important victories, and lost their most crushing defeats, in North Africa (as if the Eastern front didn't even exist). As well, viewing such a grand sweep of European history exclusively through one lens of analysis leads inevitably to some gross generalisations. On balance I would not recommend this volume for use in a lower level undergraduate course, although it might find a niche in an upper level course as an accompanying text, or as the basis for a seminar or two on nationalism in modern Europe.

Copyright (c) 1999 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/h-w-civ>

Citation: Paul Doerr. Review of Romano, Sergio, *An Outline of European History from 1789 to 1989*. H-W-Civ, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3510>

Copyright © 1999 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.