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The burden of sad times.

Stefano Bottoni, an adjunct professor of Eastern European history at Bologna University, was invited in 2006 to take part in the work of the Presidential Committee for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania as an expert in the history of Romania’s Hungarian minority. He has published numerous papers in Italian and Hungarian (his mother tongues), as well as in English, on the history and international relations of Hungary and Romania. In addition, his book Transilvania Rossa: Il Comunismo Romeno e la Questione Nazionale (1944–1965) [Red Transylvania: Romanian communism and the national question (1944–1965)] is an interesting monograph that deals with the development of an ethnocratic state in Romania during the rule of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej: government policies were aimed at the Romanianization of Transylvania, the assimilation of the Hungarian minority, and the marginalization and neglect of German and Jewish minorities. Having become a member of the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2009, Bottoni decided to publish Un altro Novecento, a history of Eastern Europe from 1919 to the present. This was a vast and difficult task to which few others in Italian historiography had dedicated their energy. THE BOOK WAS presented to the Italian public as an interpretative synthesis “intended for specialists and for all readers interested in the recent history of a peripheral area whose needs and problems increasingly impact the social and political dynamics of a continent that is formally reunited, but still divided by invisible walls and reciprocal differences”. The book is based on a number of central themes that allow an understanding and a sense of the contemporary history of countries that, with the dissolution of the three multinational empires, first experienced the fall of liberal systems and then became territories to be conquered, by German National Socialism and later by Soviet occupation. Finally, in the 1990s, these countries found themselves on a path towards European integration characterized by economic shock within the framework of a fragile democracy. It should be pointed out that the national events described in this book do not emphasize any particular geographic region, nor do they marginalize the history of any individual Eastern European State. Rather, they combine “a general timeline view with a comparative thematic approach, focusing on the social and economic development of the various countries”.

But what does Bottoni mean exactly by “Eastern Europe”? This is not an insignifi-
Another face of the Twentieth Century

cant consideration in an attempt to identify a region that is defined solely by the sum of the events of its component nations, and that lacks a center and a periphery when it comes to the international economic and political decisions of the hegemonies in the West and the East. Bottoni acknowledges that “the concept of Eastern Europe has [...] for some time lacked scientific legitimacy, having become an appellation that is closely bound to a political context and the relationship between this region and Western civilization”. In this book, “Eastern Europe” refers to “the collection of territories that, having witnessed the dissolution of three multiethnic empires after the First World War, subsequently experienced Soviet-style communism from 1939”.

This includes twenty present-day states: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. The book also makes reference to the history of Eastern Europe’s “peripheries”, namely the decision-making centers (Russia as a tsarist empire and subsequently as a Soviet empire), and the states involved in or created by the dissolution of the multinational empires, but not included in the experience of real socialism: Austria, Finland, West Germany, Greece and Italy. The pivotal role of Italy’s northeastern Friuli-Venezia Giulia region between the blocs is a more complicated issue that has yet to be investigated thoroughly.

The biggest problem in preparing a historical synthesis of Eastern Europe is “the extreme political, social and cultural diversity” of a region that “never developed a real supranational community” and whose common denominator was a prewar past consisting of multinational empires, a war of extermination, and forty years of submission to the Soviet empire. The most unifying factor was perhaps the memory of a past that never passes, consisting of the shared experience of real socialism. According to the Hungarian historian Istvan Rev, the burden of this memory of “sad times” is still present in contemporary Eastern European societies.

IT IS ON THIS very lack of a truly homogenizing factor that Bottoni bases the underlying thesis of his book. In order to decipher and narrate the twentieth-century history of a region that has not followed any type of political planning, it is not sufficient to employ nationalism and the ethnic factor as a key. To do so would reduce this history to “a continuous series of vendettas and massacres driven by ancestral impulses” (p. 16). While taking into account the significance of national and ethnic factors, the author believes that the importance of the social and economic development of the various countries must also be understood in order to convey the complexity of Eastern Europe. “Another” Novecento was the century of nationalist movements and authoritarian regimes whose presence in Eastern Europe cannot be assimilated into the mold of Italian fascism or German National Socialism. Rather, their presence demonstrates the persistence of cultural, social, and political elements of the old multinational empires in new national realities. However, as Bottoni emphasizes, the Eastern European nationalism that had become familiar to Western European interwar public opinion was only one of the many elements of the social and political life of small Eastern European states. The author considers it misleading to catalog the creation of Eastern European states as “impossible democracies”, and he encourages the reader not to judge the historical development of the interbellum period only as a prelude to an inevitable catastrophe. In these countries, state control allowed spaces of freedom that were unimaginable during the fifty-year period of communism. This was especially true in the cultural realm, where the elite created a mass political culture centered on a national independent state that would be born after 1989, when national sovereign communities were reconstituted.

The roots of the Eastern European states’ catastrophe may be sought instead in the expansionist policies of Nazi Germany, which conducted a war of conquest and annihilation that only ended with the Red Army’s liberation-cum-occupation. This provided “the only salvation” for peoples reduced to slavery by Nazism and collaborationist regimes, but it also resulted in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of civilians by Soviet soldiers, who had conducted one of the largest military operations in modern history. It is important to remember the difference between the period after the Second World War in Western Europe and that in Eastern European countries: the latter was far more traumatic, and fundamental for the subsequent reinterpretation of events by individual national communities.

LIKE THE WAR of extermination, the collaborators and resisters against the Nazi invasion – including the Soviet occupation, which lasted much longer – represent a common experience in all of the countries considered here. The Eastern European countries had to come to terms with their past by purging the collaborationists and forcing millions of people to leave their homes in order to comply with a political plan that envisaged homogeneous national areas. The Soviets applied this principle to national minorities, condemning “the past behavior of the minority community and the geopolitical position of the states involved in the conflict”. In this way, they achieved an

Illustration: Katrin Stenmark

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“ethnic simplification of the territory and of the social space” that resulted in thirty million Eastern Europeans enduring population changes, forced relocation, deportation to work camps, and massacres. Bottini also mentions the annihilation of Jewish communities as a peculiar characteristic of Eastern European countries. A new anti-Semitism, rooted in xenophobia and social envy driven by communist movements, resulted in the pogroms that drove tens of thousands of people to emigrate to the West or to Israel.

Bottini also criticizes the concept of the “Sovietization” of Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1948, which incorrectly associates the Soviet military occupation of some regions in Eastern Europe with the conquest of power by the communists. The history of communist conquest is “complex and sometimes contradictory”. The communist regimes of Eastern Europe were created through “a political, social and cultural revolution aimed at reproducing the system forged in the Soviet Union by Stalin”. Every effort of the Eastern European communist parties was aimed at copying the Soviet model – from the issuance of new constitutions based on the Soviet one, to industrialization and agricultural collectivization, to the transformation of the managerial classes on the basis of political loyalty. Another important consideration identified by Bottini is that the advent of the Soviet bloc temporarily froze national and territorial conflicts, replacing ethnic rifts with policies that integrated minorities. This resulted in a radical review of the individual populations’ national pasts by communist regimes. These years were also characterized by “a complex web of political and ideological violence, as well as social, ethnic and religious repression”, that is, purges within parties and mass repression instituted by the political police.

**COMPARSED WITH** that phase, the Khruščev era was one of continuity and breakdowns, inconsistencies and paradoxes. Nonetheless, the new era changed the face of Eastern European communities thanks to a segmentation that created new social spaces and better living conditions for millions of people. Within this general framework, the utopia of real socialism was brought to a halt by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and then normalization under Brezhnev’s grayness. As the system tried to meet the expectations of previous generations, Bottini explains, it earned the complete mistrust of the younger generations in Eastern European countries.

Subsequent economic decline was decisive in the fall of the Soviet Empire. Bottini deals with the various trajectories of this decline and the paths that various countries followed away from real socialism during the 1980s – from a repressive nationalism (Romania and Bulgaria) and an increase in propaganda (East Germany and Czechoslovakia), to explicit attempts to abandon the socialist model (Hungary and Poland).

Subsequent events in 1989–1990 quickly redrew the European political map. The dissolution of the Eastern European federated states of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia in 1991–1993 engendered a bitter debate, from which many of the points discussed in this book emerged. According to Bottini, neither of these countries was destined to fail because “they were both born in a time of crisis out of political will and accompanied by a long intellectual gestation, due to the inability of communist regimes to manage national differences in a more satisfactory way than the regimes of the interwar period”. Overall, it was an extraordinary period of change, and its political outcome was by no means expected. The Yugoslav catastrophe, according to Bottini, was an exception among the unresolved ethno-national disputes, which would suggest that the handling of diversity has now become a global problem.

In the economic decline of between 15 per cent and 40 per cent that occurred with the uncontrolled privatizations in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s, Bottini nonetheless perceives the liberation of the new generations. With the freedom to travel and the availability of technological innovations, these new generations turned out to be the real winners of this period of change, to the detriment of those born in the ‘40s and ‘50s, for whom the end of communism also meant the loss of social status and existential meaning. In this atmosphere, a selective nostalgia for the totalitarian past developed, while the search for responsibility for crimes perpetrated during the dictatorships – using the evidence of state archives that had become public – threatened to become a form of political and economic blackmail.

**BOTTONI DEDICATES** the conclusion of his book to European integration. This he considers a positive development, given that the imposition of legal standards has contributed to the democratization of countries defined as imperfect democracies or semi-authoritarian systems, even though the cases of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria have shown how “corrupt and inefficient executors can frustrate the positive aspects of European integration”. In the new century, the region’s challenges lie in understanding the problems of the immediate present. It would be useful to reappropriate the nationalistic stereotype that makes nationalism, anti-Semitism, and religious fundamentalism “specters that reappear in every news item as a threat to democracy, demonstrating that Eastern Europe remains an uncivilized place after all”.

Bottini highlights the socio-demographic problems faced by Eastern Europe: emigration and demographic decline, with a consequent decrease in active labor and taxpayers, a sharp increase in people receiving state assistance, and a lack of socio-cultural integration of Romani communities. However, as Bottini explains, “the challenge of the social sustainability of post-communist Eastern European capitalism has now transcended the ethical dimension of protecting minority groups to become one of the thorniest social issues of our continent”. He concludes that, “in order to prevent continuing fragmentation into strong centers and forgotten peripheries, theaters of conflict and massacres, Europe must learn to face the challenges and problems that are now common to East and West with no mental reservations”.

Un altro Novecento has succeeded in providing an interesting and balanced synthesis that summarizes the main themes in the history of Eastern European countries as highlighted by historiography, correlating interpretations with many examples, analyzing rather than simplifying the narrative, and thus conveying the complexity of history. Furthermore, Bottini provides a rich source of inspiration for researchers who wish to delve deeper into the history of Eastern Europe: the book has a useful, up-to-date bibliography and ample endnotes, which unfortunately require page-turning. Since the book is currently only available in Italian, this reviewer hopes that it will be translated into other languages, for it deserves to be known by the general public worldwide, and by the academic community in particular.

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