

Europe

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Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania

Emanuela Grama. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019. \$30.00. 247 pp.

Bucharest is not a historic city, but it is rich in history. The distinction turns out to be important not just for our understanding of Romania, but of politics and historiography more generally. Emanuela Grama uses the politics that surrounded the Old Town of Bucharest over the past century to force us to reconsider the constitution of the state, the relationship between identity and ideology, and the balance in historical development between grand narratives and incremental change. Moreover, she does all this by demonstrating that the study of history and the stuff of history are rarely, if ever, the same.

Grama's explicit goal is to show how Romanian political leaders instrumentalised notions of history and heritage in order to extract political advantages. Sometimes those advantages came in the form of freedom of movement, as when political leaders in the 1950s elevated stories about the Old Town of Bucharest in order to explain their deviation from Soviet-style architecture alongside their embrace of a more ethnically pure notion of Romanian society. Even though the architecture of the Old Town was unrepresentative of the classical 'Romanian' styles, and the people who lived there had long been more diverse than the rest of the country, this hardly seemed to matter for the strategy to work.

A problem emerged, however, when archaeologists discovered enough ruins amidst the rubble in the centre of the city to begin giving a physical presence to the narrative. At that point, political efforts to rebuild the Old Town as a vibrant city centre collided with bureaucratic politics inside the civic administration and were stymied by the professional conflict between archaeologists and architects. The history of the city evolved in the form of anonymous letters, memoranda, reports and decisions, even as the grand strategy for rebuilding the city centre crumbled alongside the neighbourhood that was supposed to anchor it.

Grama's narrative takes what is an unexpected and yet, in hindsight, an oddly predictable turn in the 1970s and early 1980s, as the Romanian political leadership abandons the Old Town in order to build the giant monuments to megalomania for which the country quickly became famous. The fact that the Old Town so painstakingly documented by the author as a focal point for political debate is so thoroughly eclipsed by these monstrosities explains why the area is not historic in the sense of being grand or important; nonetheless, Grama continues to pursue the history of that part of the city.

What she finds is a microcosm of misdirection, corruption and backroom dealing. At times she tries to imbue this welter of activity with a sense of overarching purpose. What comes across through her narrative, however, is a toxic mixture of opportunism, self-interest and ruthlessness. Time and again, politicians who have access to information use it to their personal economic advantage; time and again their victims choose to stay hidden rather than attract unwanted attention.

The result is devastating for both the neighbourhood and the people who inhabit it. Tragically, many of those inhabitants have no recourse: Grama says that in the eyes of the system they have no history, nor any right to their own heritage. She is surely correct from the perspective of grand narrative. But these people and this part of Bucharest do have a history, and that history is worth exploring. Grama does a brilliant job bringing their story to our attention and explaining why we should care about it. Her book deserves to be widely read.

Extreme Reactions: Radical Right Mobilization in Eastern Europe

Lenka Bustikova. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. £75.00. 298 pp.

For a short time after the fall of communism, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe outside the former Yugoslavia did not experience a rise of right-wing extremism. Before long, however, political parties that leaned to the left on economic and redistributive issues but to the right on matters related to culture and identity began to make themselves known. The question is why. The people of these countries were never thrilled about foreigners (although it would be unfair to describe them as outright xenophobic). They also did not experience a dramatic change in economic circumstances, except perhaps for the better (at least for some). Meanwhile, the European Union offered the promise of acceptance either as a member or as a neighbour – providing that countries embraced democratic liberalism. The growth of radical right-wing parties in this context is therefore hard to understand, particularly given their eclectic brand of welfare chauvinism.

Lenka Bustikova offers an interesting insight on the political dynamics that set radical politics in Central and Eastern Europe alight. She argues that the element missing from conventional explanations for right-wing extremism is the rise of minority ethnic groups that have long been present in the region but are only now insisting on their social, political and economic rights. Wherever parties supporting these groups rise in prominence or political power, and wherever the demands of these minorities find their way onto the policy agenda, the growth of right-wing extremism will not be far behind. Members of dominant