

Brunnbauer, Ulf, Hannes Grandits, eds., *The Ambiguous Nation. Case Studies from Southeastern Europe in the 20th Century*. Südosteuropäische Arbeiten 151. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013. ISBN 978-3-486-72296-3, 480 pp.

This book is a collection of 19 essays resulting from the international research project on „New and Ambiguous Nation-Building Processes in South-Eastern Europe” directed by Ulf Brunnbauer, Hannes Grandits and Holm Sundhaussen and coordinated by Rozita Dimova. The essays examine various aspects of Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), Macedonian, Montenegrin and Moldovan nation building with the focus on their ambiguity and temporality. A praiseworthy effort to analyse these generally underrepresented cases in nationalism studies and feature them in English is made even more laudable by the fact that the authors are mostly young scholars from the countries under scrutiny. In their introductory chapters project leaders insist on the open-ended and contingent nature of nation building, its continuous (re)negotiation through myths, symbols, representations and thus the ambiguity from the title as its chief feature. In his piece Sundhaussen demonstrates further how nation building is inherently ambiguous than natural, a category nationalists employ when they describe the building of their own nation or artificial when portraying that of another often inimical nations. Rightly rejecting the old typologies of good and bad (West and East European) nation building and the prevalent image of South-Eastern Europe’s idiosyncrasy, the greatest value of this book is in what the editors call real-time observations of ambiguities that reveal patterns and dynamics of nation building relevant for other cases, both contemporary and past ones.

This is however compromised by the fact that most case study authors follow the opposite logic and start with studies from other countries or theories based on other cases just to find the same pattern or dynamic in their own. Inspired by a variety of notions, such as Brubaker’s ‘Ethnicity without groups’, Herzfeld’s ‘Cultural intimacy’ and Löfgren’s ‘Nationalisation of culture’, the case studies’ authors usually depart from a distinct evolution of their topic nations during the Communist rule and then displaying more contemporary dynamics of remembering and forgetting, struggles over the control of the past, various attempts to create a unified and official national narrative, culture, monuments and memories or represent nations in festivals and media, all observed until 2008.

Temporal and transient nature of nation building is best exemplified in Vladimir Dulović captivating story on the symbolic orientation of Montenegro during socialist Yugoslavia analysing the discourse of the role of Njegoš and attempts to properly commemorate him on Mount Lovćen. Unfortunately the chapter ends abruptly without accounting for more recent twists in Montenegrin attitudes to their national poet and his role in another nation building, that of neighbouring Bosniaks. In light of recent Crimea crisis particularly illuminating is Ala Şveţ’s discussion of economic factors and regionalism in the affirmation of a Transnistrian national identity. Irena Stefoska’s refreshing and sober review of the historiography of Macedonian nation building, both foreign and Yugoslav/Macedonian, asserting how it “distorted” the past but eventually contributed to the stabilizing of national identity, that the new narratives focusing on the ancient roots of Macedonians now threaten. This most remarkable and recent shift in Macedonian national narrative unfortunately only gets a glimpse of attention in the chapter by Dimova discussing the change in agenda of its two major festivals in Ohrid and Struga. Elsewhere Gabriela Welch explains new syncretic commemorative practices underpinning the political legitimacy of post-Soviet Moldovan state leadership while Ludmila Cojocarui illuminates the rhetoric employed to create its new public image

and how these reverberate with ordinary people and those that see the same as symbols of Moldovan Romanianess. Fascinating but somewhat unsubstantiated is Admir Mulaosmanović's chapter on the links between Agrokomerc, the greatest scandal in Yugoslav economic history, and the Yugoslav military strategies and drive for Greater Serbia as well as the involvement of the Bosnian Muslim elite.

What perplexes in the introduction is when Brunnbauer and Grandits stress that "nationalism SEEMS to be a means of overcoming marginalization, achieving modernity and gaining recognition (Capitals are mine)." This seems to question Europe's last two centuries but also the idea behind the volume which puts nationalisms of small nations on equal footing. Further one might ponder how helpful is ambiguous as category when just about everything (besides nationalism, places of memory, role of intellectuals, the past and its representations are all considered ambiguous) can be subsumed under this notion? Within the same project we are furnished with an ambiguous perspective on Bosnian Muslim nation building as two authors (Iva Lučić and Husnija Kamberović) offer rather distinctive views on the key issues of definition and recognition of its separate nationhood in socialist Yugoslavia. Lučić illuminates the contending positions within the League of Communists, which was primarily interested in institutionalising a category (a nation) in light of decentralisation campaign and not as a result of an existing ethnic community whereas Kamberović follows debates among Bosnian political elites over the proper name for what is assumed as an existing nation and driven by an underdeveloped notion of centre/periphery binary in Yugoslavia's development. Few other authors find it hard to disentangle themselves from nationalisms they discuss severely limiting their conclusions or making them rather ambiguous. Finally, the sheer amount of case studies is slightly overwhelming and some abound with intricacies that only local experts can grasp or verge on trivia which might be inevitable given the nature of project and invisibility of the scholarship on these young nations in mainstream academia. Book editors and publisher should be commended for producing an almost errorless volume of formidable size in a language that none of the authors consider their own.

Bojan Aleksov

UCL-SSEES