

Book Review: The Unknown Europe: How Eastern Europe Got That Way, by James R. Payton Jr.

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BOOK REVIEW

James R. Payton, Jr., *The Unknown Europe: How Eastern Europe Got That Way*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021, 297 pp, paperback. ISBN: 979-1-6667-0475-4.

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In a recently published book, *The Unknown Europe: How Eastern Europe Got That Way*, James R. Payton Jr. offers a remarkable overview of Eastern Europe starting with the prehistoric era and concluding with a post-1989 epilogue. It's remarkable for at least three broad reasons: first, it covers over two thousand years of history without feeling burdensome or overwhelming; second, the book is enjoyable, which—readers might well know—is not typical for a book that falls loosely into the textbook category; third, the book is accessible for many types of readers, appropriate as much for an undergraduate history class as a casual reader.

As Payton assures his readers in the introduction and expands on in a later chapter, this book is also very needed. There's a paucity of books that cover the whole of Eastern Europe and do so with complete coverage from prehistoric to contemporary times. This is the "unknown Europe," despite the fact that "[a]s the centuries from antiquity unfolded, the developments in Eastern Europe advanced far beyond anything going on in Western Europe" (3). Payton blames this in part on historical narcissism in the West, which exalts everything Roman while largely ignoring Byzantium. It also comes out of a fixation with the post-WWII era, during which Eastern Europe was largely enveloped within or reacting against the Soviet Union. In an early chapter on problems in the historiography of the region, Payton notes how problematic this has been for understanding Eastern Europeans, who themselves are more aware of and affected by their past than those in the West: "The events that have transpired since the collapse of the Communist bloc indicate with utter clarity how mistaken the approach of the historiography on Eastern Europe was in this regard. The historiographical neglect of the preceding centuries did not make adequate room for an understanding of the deep-seated tensions and animosities that have burst forth within Eastern Europe in the years since 1989" (51).

This same chapter exposes another deficiency in the literature on Eastern Europe: a neglect of the important role of religion in the region. Payton blames this in part on the atheism of and religious persecution by communist governments across the region, which obscured the abiding

religiosity of East European societies during the Cold War, mostly underground. Largely, though, Payton believes the neglect of religion stems from a “western habit of mind” (57) that relegates religion to the private sphere, presuming that it neither does nor should play a public role. This is deeply problematic, as Payton points out: “Throughout the region, almost everything for centuries has been, and even today continues to be, religiously driven. In Eastern Europe, faith, church, culture, and nation have been all bound up together” (57). This book rightly addresses the critical role of religion over time, across the entire region.

After setting the stage in the first few chapters, Payton turns to eleven significant turning points in Eastern European history that, taken together, offer a relatively complete picture of this region’s story. This structure for showcasing a large region’s history over a long period of time has extraordinary advantages. For one, it efficiently focuses the readers’ attention on the epochal events, the ones that mattered most, without getting bogged down in every event, individual, or institution. In addition, this model requires a fair amount of contextualizing for each case, which in turn allows for some useful repetition, overlap, and intersecting. At times, though, this repetition is a trifling overdone: for example, the 11th century conflict between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV is considered in three chapters, with the third treatment sounding remarkably similar to the second. Payton does, to his credit, acknowledge previous treatments in the footnotes. Overall, the book’s structure is the most effective option given the expansive time frame and area that needs to be covered.

The eleven turning points that Payton focuses on, in general chronological order and as titled in chapters six through sixteen, are as follows: The Evangelization of the Slavs (860s), The Conversion of Vladimir and Kievan Rus’ (988), The Development of States (Tenth-Twelfth Centuries), The Fourth Crusade (1204), The Invasion of the Mongols (1240s), The Battle of Kosovo (1389), The Battle of White Mountain (1620), The Dismemberment of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795), The Aftermath of World War I (1918-22), The Coming of Communism (1945-1948), and The Overthrow of Communism (1989). For each of these events, some of them defined and some of them more processual, Payton does a masterful job of offering the context, the specifics of the turning point, and the implications for the region for each of these turning points. What sets this book apart, though, is the way in which Payton connects these events to Eastern Europe today.

For example, chapter nine on the Fourth Crusade starts in 2001 with Pope John Paul II asking forgiveness from the Greek Orthodox archbishop of Athens for this particular crusade.

Immediately the reader is nudged to acknowledge the significance of this crusade for the Eastern European region today and perhaps also recognizes how little he or she knows about this crusade. In the chapter on the Battle of Kosovo, Payton connects this 1389 battle with the war in Kosovo in 1998-1999, during which the Serbs fought to “make Kosovo the center of their nation again if they were to be faithful to God and to their ancestors” (181), a claim that only makes sense if one understands the significance of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo for Serbians. In sum, through this focus on epochal events in Eastern Europe’s history, the importance of understanding this history in order to understand today is made vivid time and time again.

The Unknown Europe animates the history of Eastern Europe, bringing to life the tumultuous stories of a region of the world that has seen so much sorrow and so much destruction, but through it all, so much triumph. As Eastern Europe becomes embroiled in another seemingly endless war, this history deserves to be studied, analyzed, and broadcast now, more than ever. Thanks to this book, the door to Eastern Europe has been opened.