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Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944. By Stefano Bottoni.
Translated by Sean Lambert. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press,
2017. 292 pp.

It has been almost three decades since Eastern Europe's communist governments fell and over a decade since the countries of the former Soviet Bloc joined the European Union. The time has certainly come for historians to revisit the grand narrative of Eastern European history under socialism and beyond. *Long Awaited West* is Stefano Bottoni's attempt to do just that. This is an ambitious work of synthesis that aims to distill the history of an enormous region over seven tumultuous decades. Bottoni defines "Eastern Europe" as the area that came under the influence of Soviet communism during and after World War II (p.6), a definition which encompasses parts of what became the Soviet Union (the Baltics, Western Ukraine, Moldova). The book concentrates, however, on the countries that made up the former Soviet Bloc, along with Yugoslavia and Albania.

While Bottoni makes an excellent effort to incorporate recent scholarship into the book, his narrative nonetheless largely hews to existing frameworks. The book is organized chronologically along established turning points in political history, with chapters on the impact of the war and creation of communist regimes across the region (1944–48), the Stalinist period (1949–55), the era of the Thaw and the failure of more radical reform (1956–72), the years of stagnation and the collapse of the system (1973–91), the chaos of the 1990s, and a final chapter on European integration and recent challenges to the post-communist neoliberal order. The story Bottoni tells in these chapters is focused on the actions of governments and political elites, giving only cursory attention to the everyday experiences of ordinary people. The choice to concentrate on political history and economic policy fits his general interpretation of Eastern Europe's communist regimes. Here, they are largely portrayed as repressive forces concerned primarily with maintaining their hold on power. While this is never spelled out explicitly in the text, the title of the book, *Long Awaited West*, implies that most East Europeans were not invested in socialism, but instead merely dreamed of the day when they would be able to join the West and achieve its higher standard of living. This is underscored by the cover design, which consists of an image of a barbed wire fence with a gate tantalizingly left open, pointing the way across a field into the setting sun.

In line with Bottoni's previous work, one of the book's important contributions is its attention to the issue of national minorities and nationalist

politics. Bottoni argues the region's communist governments failed to create viable policies to deal with national difference. Particularly as the region's economies began to sputter in the 1970s and 1980s, this failure encouraged different groups to see economic woes in national terms. By putting the experiences of Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union itself side by side, the book allows us to see common threads in what were otherwise quite different histories.

What most sets this book apart from similar surveys of East European history is its orientation in the contemporary moment. The motivating question behind this book is not a re-evaluation of the socialist past, but a desire to understand the situation of Eastern Europe in 2017 (when the last pages were being written). The post-communist period is therefore not treated as an epilogue or coda, but as an integral part of the narrative; fully one third of the book deals with the period after 1989. Unlike earlier authors, Bottoni does not tell a triumphalist story, in which communism is vanquished and Eastern Europe emerges free and ready to be reunited with the West. He writes from a vantage point from which we already know that joining the European Union and NATO did not bring the prosperity many had imagined. Instead, corruption became even more entrenched and neoliberal "reforms" hurt even wider swaths of the population. The 2008 financial crisis helped fuel a wave of anti-EU and nationalist populism, leading, in Hungary, to the enormous victory by Fidesz in 2010 and the Law and Justice Party in Poland in 2015. For Bottoni, this more recent past highlights the cruel irony that the Iron Curtain might be gone, but "Eastern Europe," itself a creation of the Cold War, still remains as a region that is not, and may well never be, the same as the West.

In the conclusion, Bottoni implies that the desire to be like the West—or, more precisely, to have the same standard of living as the West—has itself been the cause of Eastern Europe's misery and malaise. It created unreasonable expectations that could never be fulfilled and had the effect of widening the gap between elites who prospered and the majority who did not. What is happening in Eastern Europe today is, says Bottoni, only the most recent iteration of a longer dilemma; whether Eastern Europeans should try to mimic the West or define themselves against it in nationalist terms. Yet, for Bottoni, the only hope for Eastern Europe in the end is to become integrated into the West. Anything else, he says, would result in a "new era of catastrophe" (p.254). The book leaves us, then, at a critical juncture, wondering what the future may hold.

With any survey text, there is the question of audience. *Long Awaited West* was first published in 2011 as part of a longer history of Eastern Europe that was used by Italian university students. This revised English-language version, however, is too dense and complicated for a typical U.S. undergraduate audience. It assumes a fair amount of knowledge on the part of the reader and does not define basic concepts and terms (like “central planning” or “Stakhanovite”). Given this, the best audience for this book would consist either of graduate students or of specialists looking for a recent and readable survey of the East European past.

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