

Regions in Central and Eastern Europe, Past and Present.

By Tadayuki Hayashi and Hiroshi Fukuda (eds). Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007.

The presented book is compounded of the papers that were presented at an international symposium entitled *Regions in Central and Eastern Europe: Past and Present*, held at Hokkaido University on December 14 – 16, 2005. The *Slavic Research Center* (SRC) which organized the symposium is a national collaborating institution for comprehensive studies on Slavic Eurasian areas (former Soviet and East European areas). The authors are working at Universities in Japan, Estonia, Russia, Czech Republic, Greece, Poland and Norway which covers also the themes and topics discussed in the book. Each author refers to works of many European but also world wide scholars and writers which supplies the short papers with a lavish of details, sometimes maybe not necessarily needed. On grounds of the reason that it results in touching more than a few aspects of the topic and creating an accumulated overview rather than going into depth. But on the contrary the book can serve as a good starting point if wanting to understand the evolution of the region and its prospects to the future.

Basically the reading offers an interesting miscellaneous vision on the region of Central and Eastern Europe in

the eyes of 'outsiders', researchers from the *Slavic Eurasian Studies Program* based in Hokkaido. Some of the presented papers draw a smart line from the past, marking the early beginning of creating a region or discusses the intensifying cooperation of activities between states at a higher national or lower level while others also make broader conclusions or reference to the future.

The topic of regional cooperation is always an actual one and the region of Central and Eastern Europe is one that can be viewed as a political laboratory and as a model for other regions of the world. The states of the CEE are deeply influenced by the project of the European Union, by their own domestic problems and issues and also by their closest neighbors with whom they have strong historical relations (ranging from bilateral or multilateral treaties, cooperation, ethnic or national conflicts, wars etc). The region was marked heavily by the two world wars and left the countries economically, spiritually and culturally devastated. The Balkan wars still resonate in the hearts of the people and the message of the Russian domination and communist regime is still haunting from the past. But doing nothing would harm the countries even more, so a decision had to be made

and the process of rebuilding and cooperation started. In the countries like Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland or the three Baltic states, it can be said that they successfully confirmed to the norms and values of Western Europe while preserving their own identity and nationality, but there are still the remaining countries which struggle for acceptance, internal integrity and progress. For those the stories of the mentioned states could serve as an example and lesson on their way to political grouping based on certain common values of past and present.

The whole book is divided into four parts but a clear distinction of the topics on which they focus can not be well found and the concept of region and regionalism is repeated frequently.

The first part entitled *Regions in the Strategy for War and Peace* begins with for us a well known part of our history, in particular Masaryk's demand to create the independent Czechoslovak state together with an independent Poland and Yugoslavia and an entire zone of independent states between Germany and Russia. That is the region of Central and Eastern Europe which he called a 'zone of small nations' and the new states in which the 'small oppressed Slavic' nations would exercise their political freedom, should be created within historical and natural borders. The author lays down the facts, years and concepts but leaves an open end to the outcome of the 'zone of small nations' which is the point that seems to be as interesting, if not

more than, the information given. But maybe this was the aim of the author, to capture the readers' attention and make him search for the final destiny of Masaryk's proposal or others similar to his.

The attention then moves up to the North into the chapter *Regionalization as Europe-Making: The Case of Europe's North*. Compared to the first chapter, Pertti Joenniemi discusses a more recent period of time and brings in the question of cooperation based on internal and external security of Russia and its relations with the EU for example, to the War on Terrorism which divided Europe in the eyes of the US between an 'old' and 'new' Europe where also the states of the North occupied two different camps. An interesting debate is then formed including theoretical backgrounds and reasons for or against cooperation in the region where the two determinants are the EU and Russia each accentuating a different way of political thinking. The overall idea which is promoted by the author is that a configuration with two cores, Brussels and Moscow would be the optional for further cooperation which would be an alternative to the two excessive approaches: concentric Europe and the Olympic rings.

The second part of the book presents a smart shift out of the pure political thinking as it was in the first part and brings in a broader and brighter perspective of the region starting with the search of identity of the Baltic States as complex of culture, politics,

ethnics and economy. Under each aspect Eiki Berg gives a brief summary where each of the three states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania stand creating a solid and comprehensible overview. The next chapter then continues to elaborate how the 'Baltic' is perceived internationally and makes final remarks that the region is important, especially for the US related to the war on terrorism. Going back into the theme of relations between the EU and Russia, Kaliningrad is introduced in the following chapter. Although being one of the shorter papers, the aim of the author is to broaden the understanding of Kaliningrad's current place in European politics and its future was achieved by answering the fundamental questions that concern both the EU and Russian sides. The topic of the distinction between the West and Russia seems to dominate the whole second part. At the end of it, the last chapter introduces a small discourse on whether there exists a 'central European' consciousness through literature using the examples of Milan Kundera (Czech), Witold Gombrowicz (Polish), Jaan Kross (Estonian), Ismail Kadare (Albanian) and Milorad Pavić (Serbian). From my point of view and literature that I have read I would agree with the authors conclusion that the central European literature is keenly aware of its position between Western Europe and Russia by stressing its difference from Russia and wishes to assimilate itself to the West but always related to both.

The third part headlines *Regional Concepts and Locus of Nation*, and tries to trace the nation building process of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Slovakia (by the person of Ludovít Štúr), Czech Republic (employing literature) and Greece (cultural changes). The first mentioned paper was probably the most interesting. The reason why is the way in which the author elaborates the Commonwealth (the third largest country in the first half of the 17th century in Europe). The Commonwealth is discussed in two aspects: internal diversity and political organization and integration of such a huge territorial complex which strongly reminds me of the European Union and its functioning on the same bases. A comparison of the past and present here would be a compelling point. On the contrary the Slovak and Czech cases are written in a more complex way and a basic level of background knowledge about Slovak history and Czech literature is vital to fully understanding the processes of nation building.

The fourth and final part of the book, *Regional Identities in Central and Eastern Europe* leads us into the period after the Second World War and turns the focus on the search for identity of the after-war states especially focusing on a certain effort to escape from the German domination. Various processes are presented ranging from the deportation of the Germans from Czechoslovakia to changing names of the ex-German territories in Poland. This part of the book is written in a

more narrative style and is easy to follow which can be marked as a big positive in comparison with some other papers presented earlier.

Coming to the end of the book the authors finally reach the more southern parts of the CEE region, the Balkans. At the beginning the usage and occurrence of the concept 'Balkan' is introduced, reminding more of a grammatical lecture, but as the author puts it, it will be a clue to understanding the change of language performance and of the society which uses it, helping us to keep up with the Balkans. And, last but not least is the final paper by Dzemal Sokolovic which could be remarked as one of the best ones, discussing the relations of the US and Europe towards Democratization in the Balkans, specifically Bosnia and Herzegovina. The controversial point is that Sokolovic perceives Europe as a threat to Bosnia and makes remarks that the people in the Balkans have a good reason to be scared of any further steps coming from Europe and rather the US is the one that really helps. Europe is portrayed as the one that offers democracy but only as a seductive carrot through out the Office of the High Representative and its Bonn Powers while the US is the one that

did far more in Bosnia and Yugoslavia during war time and afterwards. I would not quite agree with the author on his opinion because in the present, the work of the Office of the High Representative is marked positively and leading Bosnia to become a more stable country.

The publication does not have a formal epilogue, leaving the reader to come up with his own conclusion and giving him space to absorb all the information given. All in all, the entire book meets its end as an outcome of a symposium on the *Regions of Central and Eastern Europe: Past and Present*. For the people not living in this region and not knowing probably as much as a native inhabitant the book can serve for general understanding. Anyone who is interested in studying the 'central' region from a broader aspect not only the historical-political one, but also encountering the cultural dimension linked with myths or even morphological background and literature should find this publication attractive.

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