

**Balász Trencsényi/Constantin Iordachi/Péter Apor (eds.): *The Rise of Comparative History (= Perspectives on Comparative and Transnational History in East Central Europe and Beyond. A Reader, vol. 1)*, Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2021, 412 pp.**

Reviewed by  
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In recent years, comparative research has received renewed attention in the humanities and social sciences.[1] The publication of *The Rise of Comparative History* emerges from the Comparative History Project, which was launched at the Central European University in Budapest in 2006 and codirected by the editors Balász Trencsényi, Constantin Iordachi, and Péter Apor. It is the latest addition to a range of publications on historiography in Central and Eastern Europe that the three editors have published over the last 15 years.[2] *The Rise of Comparative History* is the first part of a three-volume reader that seeks to provide an overview of the legacies and new perspectives on comparative and transnational history in East-Central Europe within a global research context. Each of the three volumes is concerned with a different period of historiographical writing. The first volume traces efforts in the interwar period that sought to devise comparative research frameworks as an alternative to national exceptionalism. The second volume will continue the chronology and

follow the discussion on comparative approaches after 1945 while linking them to macro-theories of sociology in the context of the Cold War. Finally, the third volume will turn to the proliferation of comparative and transnational approaches after 1989. According to the Central European University Press, all three volumes are designed to be stand-alone books. Therefore, this review discusses *The Rise of Comparative History* separately, with the publisher's aim in mind and without knowledge of the content of the subsequent volumes.

The first volume is an anthology of texts written between the 1910s and early 1940s that outline the main features of comparative historical studies, with a particular emphasis on the historiographical traditions in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. In the introduction, Trencsényi, Iordachi, and Apor outline the objectives of the volume as a result of their own research and teaching, where they observed a lack of access to key readings that had been translated into English. Therefore, this anthology includes a selection of excerpts from 18 texts that were written by scholars with personal and educational backgrounds in places ranging from France and Germany to Hungary, Romania, and Serbia and that were translated from their respective languages into English. Some of the texts were reproduced from earlier English translations, such as Marc Bloch's "A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies" (1967 [1928]) and Otto Hintze's "The Preconditions of Representative Government in the Context of World History" (1975 [1931]). What makes the anthology stand out is the editors' aim to bring the texts by Bloch, Hintze, and oth-

ers into a dialogue with “less well-known texts” (p. 25) coming from East-Central and Southeastern Europe. The readers find excerpts from monographs, articles, and conference proceedings that are accompanied by short biographies of the authors and information on the historiographical context of the texts.

The volume starts with a selection of texts focusing on German, French, and Belgian history and then places a particular emphasis on the supranational approaches developed within the context of Southeastern European and Balkan studies. Here the editors do not limit their selection to historians, but they also include authors from other disciplines, such as human geography (Jovan Cvijić), classical philology and linguistics (Milan Budimir and Petar Skok), and political science (David Mitrany). This selection is a result of the editors’ argument in the introduction that comparative history did not form part of the historiographical mainstream in the early twentieth century. According to the editors, while the discipline of history focused on the nation-state, comparative approaches rather emerged from cross-disciplinary discussions or were in connection with topics that went beyond national frameworks. This concerned, in particular, the social, cultural, and economic development of different nations and the local adaptation of what were considered universal phenomena (such as revolutions or liberalism), which are addressed in the texts of the anthology. In view of the extensive historiographical literature of potential interest, the editors aim to provide “a sampling of different national and transnational historiographic traditions” rather than to reproduce a canon on comparative history (p. 27). By

framing it like this, the editors understate the intertextual and personal references made by the authors in the selected contributions and instead leave it to the readers to unravel these interlinkages. For instance, Bloch refers to the texts by Henri Pirenne and Louis Davillé as predecessors of his own historiographical deliberations (p. 90), which are both included in the anthology. The writing by Georghe I. Brătianu can be found alongside those from his collaborator Victor Papacostea and his mentor Nicolae Iorga. Indeed, many of the authors featured in the anthology were part of the same transnational networks, in particular in the context of the International Congresses of Historical Sciences. The importance of this institutional setting for the elaboration of comparative historical studies in the interwar period is only underlined by the book cover, which shows a group of participants of the seventh congress, held in Warsaw in 1933.

While the editors accentuate their objective to initiate a dialogue between the historiographical traditions in Western Europe and those in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, their selection of texts conveys further arguments that go beyond this rationale given in the introduction. Crucially, the assembly of only male authors reproduces a gendered understanding of the discipline of history and in particular the history of historiography as an all-male enterprise.[3] While women indeed have had a marginalized position in academia, this selection is especially regrettable because the editors strived to expand the conventional scope of historical scholarship. This intervention into discourse can be seen in particular in the cross-disciplinary approach of the

anthology, which chooses to include a human geographer over a historian. Namely, the text “Aim and Significance of Balkan Studies” (1934) by Budimir and Skok mentions Cvijić, one of the authors in the volume, as their inspiration from the perspective of human geography, whereas Konstantin Jireček, whom they credit as their inspiration for historical approaches (p. 355), was omitted from the anthology. Here the focus of the editors on bringing out the regional research tradition obscures, to some extent, the method of comparison with studies examining difference and diversity within a region or state. In some cases, like Yugoslavia, bridging difference through historical enquiry also served the objective of state-building, being arguably shared with national frameworks. Here it remains to be seen whether the second and third volumes will address more prominently the role of ideology in comparative approaches that not only seek to bridge difference but also legitimate the alleged superiority of economy, government, or people over another. The complicity of scholarship with genocide and eugenics can be observed in the biography of Fritz Valjavec, the last author included in *The Rise of Comparative History*.

In sum, the 18 texts and the excellent overview in the introduction provide a range of fascinating angles for further reflection on comparative methods in historical studies. The English translation of the Hungarian text by István Hajnal, alongside others, allows for a more diverse engagement with

historiographical traditions in research and teaching. Moreover, the emphasis on cross-disciplinary approaches is one of the major strengths of this volume, which will appeal not only to historians but also to scholars in other fields. Several of the texts in the second part of the book are indeed part of a canon, though not in what is today considered the field of comparative history in English-language academia. These texts were formative for area studies ranging from Balkan studies and Black Sea studies to Southeastern European studies or Eastern European studies. The accessibility of key readings in English gives reason to hope for greater engagement with these intellectual traditions in the overarching fields of historical enquiry.

#### Notes

- 1 Out of the manifold activities, I will only mention the DFG Collaborative Research Centre “Practices of Comparing” at Bielefeld University (since 2017) and the emerging field of Comparative Area Studies (CAS), whose approaches were outlined in A. I. Ahram/P. Köllner/R. Sil (eds.), *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications*, New York 2018.
- 2 Among other publications, these include S. Antohi/B. Trencsényi/P. (eds.), *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Budapest/New York 2007; B. Trencsényi/M. Kopeček (eds.), *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe. Text and Commentaries*, 2 vols., Budapest 2006/2007; J. Lampe/C. Iordachi (eds.): *Battling over the Balkans: Historiographical Questions and Controversies*, Budapest 2020.
- 3 See, for example, F. Schnicke, *Die männliche Disziplin. Zur Vergeschlechtlichung der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1780–1900*, Göttingen 2015.