

proves extraordinarily useful because we learn from the author himself with what motives and against what background the printed essays were written. And so we follow him on the path to a theory of the state during the French Revolution, to the role of Maximilien Robespierre, and to the history of the various organizations of French (revolutionary) historians, for example, during the German occupation in the Second World War or after the end of the Cold War. Mazauric and his editors have left the next generation of historians a treasure trove of insights that can help to understand the profession and its peripeties in the second half of the twentieth century and thus perhaps also to realize what this has to do with our own exercise of the profession.

Raquel Varela: *A People's History of Europe: From World War I to Today*, London: Pluto Press, 2021, 252 pp.

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“A people’s history” became the hallmark of a new kind of historiography a little bit more than half a century ago. At least two characteristics converged here. On the one hand, many authors not only evoked the tradition of a history from below, which had found a famous pioneer in Edward P. Thompson in the late 1950s, but also, in a broader phalanx, reconceived a history of the early modern period and the era of the French Revolution by asking about

the social and mental history of peasants and sansculottes and the intervention of the nameless in the political history of the elites. Albert Soboul, Richard Cobb, Kalmán Benda, Georges Rudé, Walter Markov, and a whole series of others were concerned with the seemingly insignificant, ordinary men and women, without whom history did not proceed yet who too often appeared only as the “masses”. The demarcation from a liberal historiography that concentrated on the educated and those in power was constitutive for this history from below, which initially took on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe but soon expanded its view to include the anti-colonial uprisings outside Europe. A second characteristic was related to this. Authors of this history from below saw themselves as representatives of a radical history – a social commitment of historians to the cause of the underprivileged.

These histories were to be academically of the highest calibre, but they were to find their audience outside university circles as a means of encouraging those who were the underprivileged of the present. The people’s history advocated the possibility of alternative paths in history and highlighted the moments of forks in the road where the victory or defeat of such alternative paths was decided. The authors of people’s history understood and still understand this as an encouragement to search for such alternatives in the present and future as well and not to resign themselves to the existing conditions. Correspondingly explicit was the reference to the social movements from below, to whom this kind of historiography was intended to offer their own image of history.

Howard Zinn had presented a version of the history of the United States in 1980 that wanted to offer not only a supplement to what had been known so far but also a critical version of the “fundamental nationalist glorification of the country” and a narrative that focused on a heroic march towards democracy. That such a version of history in which the oppressed often fight back but are mostly defeated at the end of their class struggles meets with opposition does not come as a surprise. Not coincidentally, spurred by then contemporary events, Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen presented the conservative counter-manifesto in 2004 with *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror*.

The Portuguese historian Raquel Varela thus consciously places herself in a tradition to which, incidentally, she herself contributed a few years ago with a history of the Portuguese Revolution (2018) – also conceived as a history from below and as a history of a caesura that opened up new possibilities for social development in Portugal and in the areas of Africa finally liberated from colonial rule.

This prehistory now informs her narrative of European history since World War I. This history, unlike the account of the Portuguese Revolution, is not a work that opens up new archives or makes use of previously completely unnoticed material. Rather, it is driven by an effort to weave the many known pieces of a history of social movements in Europe into a new narrative. In doing so, Varela focuses on ordinary people and structures her narrative by using data on social movements (preferably strikes and other forms of unrest in response to socioeconomic crises), but she

does not reduce this view to the industrial workforce. Here the merit of a decentring view from the European south-west becomes clear, for in the social struggles of Portugal (and numerous other countries in the so-called peripheries of Europe) the land question, the injustices in military hierarchies, and the experience of exploitation in the colonies continue to play an important role in motivating resistance to established forms of domination.

The content of and argumentative prelude to this European history are World War I; the Russian Revolution; and, above all, the absence of (successful) revolutions in Western and Central Europe serve the author as the main explanations for the transformation of a successful socialist revolution into Stalinism. The following history of a century that goes beyond the year 2000 follows a three-step description of a history of the defensive struggles of ordinary people in the face of the deep crises of capitalism. The crisis of 1929 is followed by the next crisis in the early 1970s with the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and finally by the crisis of 2008. The revolutions that accompanied these defensive struggles (Varela highlights a large number of revolutionary convulsions that characterize the twentieth century) were almost universally not directly successful but at times spurred reforms in favour of workers and the expansion of the welfare state. This was accompanied, however, by a tendency towards militarization and mobilization for total wars, which was inevitably inherent in an imperialism that was not only concerned with the conquest of colonies. Varela recalls Osvaldo Coggiola's striking metaphor: “the burning of wealth becomes an imperative of capital metabolism” (p. 23).

In contrast to a narrative in which the Red Army saved liberal capitalism by bearing the brunt of the defeat of fascism, Varela sees Stalinism as the fruit of the failure of the Bolshevik revolution and not so much as a result of the international constellation. She does not conceal her sympathy for Trotsky and his refusal to bring the Red Army to bear against Stalin's bureaucracy. In her view, such a militarization of the revolution would have led to similar encrustations that Stalin's takeover had produced. She remains consistent in her perspective of tying the success of revolutions to the preservation of their emancipatory quality. The fact that revolutions also have the function of encouraging the victorious opposing side to reform out of fear of the next shock is also brought into the story, but this fact remains in the background of the narrative, in contrast to the emphatic emphasis on the emancipatory quality of revolutions.

The strongest chapter in the volume is undoubtedly devoted to the new awakening of social unrest in the 1960s and 1970s, for here the author is able to draw on her deep familiarity with the history of the labour movement in the Global North and Global South, as well as with the wave of revolutions from Portugal to Mozambique to Angola. Here she emphasizes the potential of an enduring resistance to the dismantlement of welfare states that has become dominant since the 1980s and that has continued to this day, culminating in the economic crisis of 2008.

It is not surprising that the author vigorously opposes the ideas of any end of his-

tory, be it part of a liberal or a Marxist-Leninist ideology. Although Stalinism finally failed in 1990, the socialist perspective in her eyes has not disappeared from the agenda; however, this perspective requires a new conceptualization that takes into account the experiences of multiple failures in the twentieth century but does not distance itself from the social demands and hopes contained therein.

The history of the masses (or of the people) in twentieth-century Europe was one of social improvement, of failed illusions, and of deep setbacks, as well as of brutal suffering under the wars that gripped the continent. But it was not, in the stimulating version that Varela presents to us, teleologically oriented towards a clear goal that could be achieved without alternative, nor was it a story that followed the same course to be taken everywhere. To understand it, one must engage with the differentiated nature of situations and social equations. In addition, one must not view the continent in isolation from its connections with other world regions (or even misunderstand it as the centre of the world), and, according to Varela's central message, one should never underestimate the inexhaustible energy of the many because, after every defeat, new attempts can be observed – sometimes only in niches of societies, but sometimes also as entire chains of revolutions – at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when many commentators had expected the definitive end of such an impulse.