

Wars and Betweenness: Big Powers and Middle Europe, 1918–1945. Ed. Bojan Aleksov and Aliaksandr Piahanaŭ. Budapest: Central European Press, 2020. vii, 238 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$65.00, hard-bound.

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The writing of history is a continuous process, stimulated by new access to primary sources, by new questions that are raised, and by scholars who address the emerging perspectives. As Bojan Aleksov and Aliaksandr Piahanaŭ point out in their Introduction to this excellent study, their work does just that—provides new perspective on the interwar period in what is usually called central Europe. The very title of the book announces that perspective—War because the focus is on the years between World Wars One and Two but even more to the point, the concept of Betweenness—not just in terms of the years but also the notion that central Europe in this era is Middle Europe—caught between the failed old empires and the revised big powers that emerged after 1918.

The Introduction by Aleksov and Piahanaŭ provides a thorough overview of the themes and insights that are addressed. The big powers studied were primarily Britain, France, and Italy, with some focus on the US and Japan. Germany and Russia are players in big power politics, both as actors and as subjects. The popular conception is that the big powers failed in their efforts to create a new Europe. This book suggests a much more nuanced interpretation, recognizing that national self-determination was a key factor, which the big powers both aroused and tried to shape, but also how some of the new states were able to manipulate big power disagreements to their own ends. As is analyzed in several of the chapters, some of the new nation-states were able to use big power differences. An important contribution is that some chapters go beyond the traditional approach, namely dominance by the big powers and the instability of the new states. Topics such as mass politics, new institutions, and culture are analyzed in the context of this “middle,” that is, interwar history and politics. The ten studies in the book are described in the introduction as offering “analyses of diplomatic, military, economic, or cultural engagement. . . in the highly volatile region” (7). The contributors are scholars associated with major academic institutions in Europe who have done extensive research in the archives of the region, including hitherto inaccessible materials; their chapters reflect an interdisciplinary approach, new perspectives, and a depth of analysis.

The case studies are organized into five clusters: Balancing (Out) of Power, Bordering, Putting out Fire with Gasoline, Self-determination, and Culturing and Perceiving. Each of the five themes are addressed by different scholars—one chapter in each cluster focuses on the decade of the twenties and the second, often but not always, on the thirties or on the continuity of particular issues.

Cluster One addresses French and British policies toward the region. Gusztav Kecskes examines French efforts in the 20s to exert influence in central Europe as a block against Germany. Dragan Bakic examines the fluctuating British views on how to deal with Germany in the period 1936–39.

Cluster Two focuses on border issues. Frederic Dessberg studies French policy relative to crucial Polish borders: Posen, Danzig, Upper Silesia, and Vilnius, as directed at strengthening Poland and weakening Germany. Iskander E. Magadeev examines Soviet foreign policy relative to the complex question of Transylvania and demonstrates how Soviet interests were paramount.

Cluster Three focuses on the issues of controlling raw materials and economic nationalism. Sergey Ledenev describes the oil-related motives of the French in supporting the acquisition of eastern Galicia by Poland. Alessandro Sette analyzes the Italian efforts to control Albanian petroleum against British interests.

Cluster Four examines how the big powers sought to benefit from nationalist movements. David X. Noack examines futile attempts by Germany in the 20s to mobilize Carpathian Germans to push for autonomy in Slovakia and Ruthenia in order to undermine Czechoslovakia. Anne-Sophie Nardelli-Malgrand examines the shifting policy of Italy relative to the independence of Austria in the period 1918–33 and the factors behind that shifting.

The final Cluster addresses perceptions of the big powers. Stefano Santoro uncovers Italian efforts at cultural propaganda. The last piece, by Ian Nish, seems to shift focus but in fact shows Japan as playing a big power role and how Japanese perceptions of Germany and the USSR affected Middle Europe in the late 30s.

This book makes a significant contribution to the study of Middle-central-east European history.

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The Long Sixth Century in Eastern Europe. By Florin Curta. *East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450, vol. 72.* Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2021. xii, 516 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Figures. €156.00, hard bound. doi: 10.1017/slr.2022.238

The period known as the long sixth century, which lasted from ca. 500 until 680, was a time of profound transformation leading from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. Recent European historiography on the period has often focused on tracing the common Late Antique roots of European social and economic integration, but it is a drawback of much of this work that eastern Europe is frequently omitted from the picture. In recent years, an ongoing series of more than eighty volumes published by Brill under the general editorship of Florin Curta has attempted to fill this academic gap. The present volume, by Curta himself, is the crowning achievement of this project, offering as it does a synthetic history of eastern Europe throughout the sixth and seventh centuries.

Curta conceptualizes the topic in terms of the interaction between two vast geographical zones: the “Roman orbit” and the land beyond its reach. The former encompasses the territory of Eastern Roman Empire, namely the Balkans and Crimea, plus regions such as the Carpathian Basin, the Lower Danube, and the Pontic Steppe that had varying degrees of interaction with the Roman world. The latter region, by contrast, encompassed areas further to the north and east, from the Baltic to the Ural Mountains.

The volume focuses on socio-economic questions such as production, property, exchange, and social differentiation by analyzing a range of written and archaeological data. Archaeological material is of particular importance for studying the northern and eastern parts of Europe that lay beyond the scope of Byzantine or other written sources. Fortunately, the archaeology of early medieval eastern Europe was extremely well studied in the Soviet period, when the Soviet school of material culture placed particular emphasis on studying the social and economic life of non-elite groups. Curta’s book not only draws on such scholarly literature to provide a historiographical overview of the history and archaeology of late antique transformation in