Austrian History Yearbook (2023), 1–2
doi:10.1017/S0067237823000681

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Check for updates

BOOK REVIEW

Naimark, Norman M. Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. 361.

Günter Bischof

University of New Orleans, USA
Email: gjbischo@uno.edu

This is a book by a master historian of Eastern Europe. It is based on extensive archival research in Soviet/Russian, American, British, German, and Austrian archives and an easy familiarity with the major literature on the period in half a dozen languages. One would think one knows the issues and facts of the origins of the Cold War in Europe well, but Naimark puts together a book of seven case studies (the Borholm interlude, Albania/Yugoslavia, Finland, Italy, Germany, Poland, and Austria) that together give us new insights into how Stalin dealt with Europe after the war. Next to Stalin's policies, Naimark is interested in the role these individual countries played in attaining or failing to attain their postwar sovereignty, and the coming of the Cold War.

The most surprising result of this study is Naimark's contention that "there is very little evidence that Stalin had a preconceived plan for creating a bloc of countries in Europe with a common Soviet style system" (6, 8–17). His main concern was with Soviet postwar security, so Germany, Poland, and Finland were important to him. Interestingly (and based on Jonathan Haslam), Naimark speculates that Stalin's spread of influence into east Central Europe "may well have been related to the idea that increased Soviet 'space' would compensate him of the postwar asymmetry in nuclear weaponry with the West" (6f). Naimark is very impressed by European statemen like Ernst Reuter in Berlin, Juho Kusti Paasikivi in Finland, Karl Renner and Leopold Figl in Austria, and Alcide de Gasperi in Italy who fought the Russian and local communists to attain the right to govern themselves after having lost their sovereignty in World War II (267f).

The individual case studies are the "meat" of this book. Naimark examines the Soviet occupation of the Danish island of Bornholm from the end of the war until April 1946, which had been taken due to its wartime occupation by the Germans. Danish politicians were not fighting the Soviets taking the island, but Soviet troops were unpopular with the local population. The chapter on Albania addresses the attempt of Tito's Yugoslavia to swallow the country. In the end, Stalin broke with Tito in 1948 due to Tito's aggressive policies in the Balkans region and Albania retained its independence under the wily Enver Hoxha. Finland was important to Soviet security due to the long border it shared with the Soviet Union. Stalin sent Andrei Zhdanov as his proconsul to Finland with the intention that the country that had sided with Nazi Germany during World War II and had taken part in the siege of Leningrad should "never again become the base for an invasion of the Soviet Union" (89). Paasikivi's foreign policy line was not to upset Moscow. Finland paid its reparations to the Soviet Union, did not participate in the Marshall Plan, and signed a "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Aid" with the Soviets in April 1948, giving the country more room to maneuver vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and not sharing the fate of Czechoslovakia, where the communists had managed to seize power in a coup a few weeks earlier.

Italy had a decisive election on 18 April 1948, which the communists hoped to win. The US (especially the CIA and the Italian American community) was heavily involved with anti-Communist propaganda, as was the Vatican. In the end, the Christian Democrats won with 48.5 percent of the vote—the communists gathering only 31 percent (145). Stalin was not happy with the moderate communist leader Palmiro Togliatti about the outcome: Italians had chosen the

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Regents of the University of Minnesota

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237823000681 Published online by Cambridge University Press

path of democracy. The chapter about the Berlin blockade deals with the division of Germany in 1948/49. Stalin did not want war over Berlin and did not mobilize the Red Army at home, nor did he reinforce troops in the Soviet zone (159). The blockade made Berliners turn to the West just like West Germany turned to the West after 1949 (159). The outcome of the crisis was that “both Berlin and Germany were divided even more than before the crisis had started” (192).

Moscow wanted a “friendly” and “democratic” Poland after the war, which meant that “the rulers in Moscow would determine the character of Poland’s postwar government as well as its political leadership” (196). The Polish communists who had stayed in Moscow during the war were subservient to Stalin and came to dominate the party leadership after the war. Those like Władysłav Gomulka, who remained in Poland and fought in the underground, favoured a “Polish road to socialism.” An independently-minded communist leader like Tito in Yugoslavia, Gomulka frequently crossed swords with Stalin and with the fractious party leadership, consequently leading to his ouster as party chief in 1948 (230). Naimark stresses how such independence among satellites was not appreciated in the Kremlin.

Naimark is to be lauded for including a chapter on Austria, which in much Anglo-American literature is normally subsumed under Germany. He shows a sure hand in postwar Austrian affairs, having served as the co-editor of a volume of important Soviet documents published by the Academy of Sciences in the anniversary year 2005. Based on documents from this collection, Naimark is as critical of Austrian communists, who wanted to divide the country in 1948 on Tito’s advice, as the Kremlin leaders were after the war (245). Unlike much of the country, the Austrian communists did not want the occupation to end. Zhdanov chided the Austrian communist leaders: “We believe in your strength. You don’t. That’s the main difference between us” (261). That leaves us with the question: Were the Kremlin leaders more Austrian than the Austrian communists? There is one correction to be made in the Austrian section: Karl Renner was not the “first president of the Austrian Republic (1918)” (235) but the first chancellor. In the Second Republic, he would serve as the first chancellor of the provisional government, set up by Stalin and the Soviets, and then as the first president.

Naimark concludes the book with some observations on “memory politics” in Europe related to World War II, indeed a very contemporary topic. He could not foresee that the war against Ukraine, unleashed by Vladimir Putin in 2022, would change the geopoliticial landscape of Europe, with Finland joining NATO in 2023 and Austria discussing the utility of its neutral status.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237823000681 Published online by Cambridge University Press