



Politics without a Past: The Absence of History in Postcommunist Nationalism

Shari J. Cohen

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In *Politics without a Past* Shari J. Cohen offers a powerful challenge to common characterizations of postcommunist politics as either a resurgence of aggressive nationalism or an evolution toward Western-style democracy. Cohen draws upon extensive field research to paint a picture of postcommunist political life in which ideological labels are meaningless and exchangeable at will, political parties appear and disappear regularly, and citizens remain unengaged in the political process.

In contrast to the conventional wisdom, which locates the roots of widespread intranational strife in deeply rooted national identities from the past, Cohen argues that a profound ideological vacuum has fueled destructive tension throughout postcommunist Europe and the former Soviet Union. She uses Slovakia as a case study to reveal that communist regimes bequeathed an insidious form of historical amnesia to the majority of the political elite and the societies they govern. Slovakia was particularly vulnerable to communist intervention since its precommunist national consciousness was so weak and its only period of statehood prior to 1993 was as a Nazi puppet-state. To demonstrate her argument, Cohen focuses on Slovakia's failure to forge a collective memory of the World War II experience. She shows how communist socialization prevented Slovaks from tying their individual family stories—of the Jewish deportations, of the anti-Nazi resistance, or of serving in the wartime government—to a larger historical narrative shared with others, leaving them bereft of historical or moral bearings.

Politics without a Past develops an analytical framework that will be important for future research in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and beyond. Scholars in political science, history, East European and post-Soviet studies will find Cohen's methodology and conclusions enlightening. For policymakers, diplomats, and journalists who deal with the region, she offers valuable insights into the elusive nature of postcommunist societies.

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