

# Goodbye Eastern Europe: An Intimate History of a Divided Land

Jacob Mikanowski, 2023

Publisher: Oneworld Publications

Pages: 400

Language: English

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As scholars of the region, we are often inevitably confronted by well-meaning friends and acquaintances with the question of ‘Why Eastern Europe?’. Besides the perhaps facetious response of ‘Why not?’, Mikanowski’s book now stands as an excellent recommendation to those who wish to understand why the region continues to fascinate. Immensely readable and filled with intricate colour and detail, it is a fitting rejoinder to the assumption that ‘Eastern Europe is a gray place, where no one ever laughed’.<sup>1</sup>

The work is aptly subtitled as *An Intimate History of a Divided Land*. The narrative soars from macro to the micro, recounting the local legends of now vanished villages within the overarching scope of great historical disjunctions. It is the use of both these frames that makes the work so compelling; the history of the region has tragically been one in which everyday lives have been caught in the crossfire of monumental upheavals and disjunctions, as he illustrates with anecdotes from his own personal family history.

The book is divided into three sections, corresponding to faiths, empires, and peoples, and finally the twentieth century. These sections are then divided further to provide an overview of the diversity within the region’s history. The prologue and epilogue, as well as the author’s own

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<sup>1</sup> As asked by a student of Mikanowski’s colleague. Jacob Mikanowski, *Goodbye, Eastern Europe* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2023), p. xv.

travel notes interwoven in the text, serve as the connection to the modern day, in which the richly interwoven tapestry of ‘Eastern Europe’ now appears thinning and frayed.

Mikanowski opens with a chapter on Paganism and Christianity, bringing attention to an interaction that is often overlooked, but remains an important part of folk practices in the region today. Subsequent chapters in the first section consider Jewish histories in Eastern Europe, the influence of Islam, and the role played by so-called heretical sects of the major religions. He ultimately emphasises the diversity as well as syncretism and interaction found between faiths, challenging modern assumptions of homogeneity in the region. The second section addresses the empires that once carved up this part of the continent, examining the impacts of the rise and fall of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and Russian empires on ordinary lives and our perception of the region today. This section also discusses the ethnic diversity of the region and the birth of nationalism. The final section necessarily addresses the legacies of Communism and the Second World War, bringing us to the modern day.

By far the most striking aspect of Mikanowski’s work is the poetry and lyricism with which he writes. He weaves from vampires to the Sarajevo Zoo, creating a rich text, thick with emotion for forgotten ways of life and coexistence.

Given the impressive nature of the work, Mikanowski’s interchangeable use of Romani and Gypsy in the chapter regarding the Roma in Eastern Europe is disappointing. The latter term, while having a complex history, particularly in the United Kingdom, can be regarded as pejorative in most contexts. Beyond a necessary explication of the term and its historical usage, its further use within the chapter felt like it undermined the author’s work in bringing the long and unacknowledged history of Roma oppression in Eastern Europe to light.

Mikanowski opens the prologue with the assertion that ‘This is a place where no one comes from’. There is perhaps a tension of his declaring Eastern Europe to be an outsider’s catch all while simultaneously taking it up as the unproblematic object of study in this work. Can something be disappearing if it never truly existed? The book is an expansion on his 2017 essay of the same title that appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.<sup>2</sup> However, the central principle in fact receives more attention in this essay than the latter expanded work, which is a

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Mikanowski, ‘Goodbye, Eastern Europe!’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 January 2017, <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/goodbye-eastern-europe/>>.

shame, and perhaps suggests that the book was intended for a more general and casual reader. However, the book opens the larger question to scholars as to how we continue to define our object of study, adding to broader debates in the field about the continuing suitability of terms such as 'Eastern Europe' and 'Post-Communist'.

*Goodbye Eastern Europe* should appeal to all with an interest in the region, with the broad strokes structure accompanied by intricate archival detailing, as well as Mikanowski's exquisite prose, leaving something to be appreciated by novices and experts alike. The book is not intended as a rigorously academic exploration of the historical and political dynamics of Eastern Europe, and so some may initially be disappointed. However, they should be equally delighted with what they find instead. What Mikanowski has created is a beautifully readable and moving paean that sums up so much of the beauty and tragedy of the region we study.