

The New Criterion

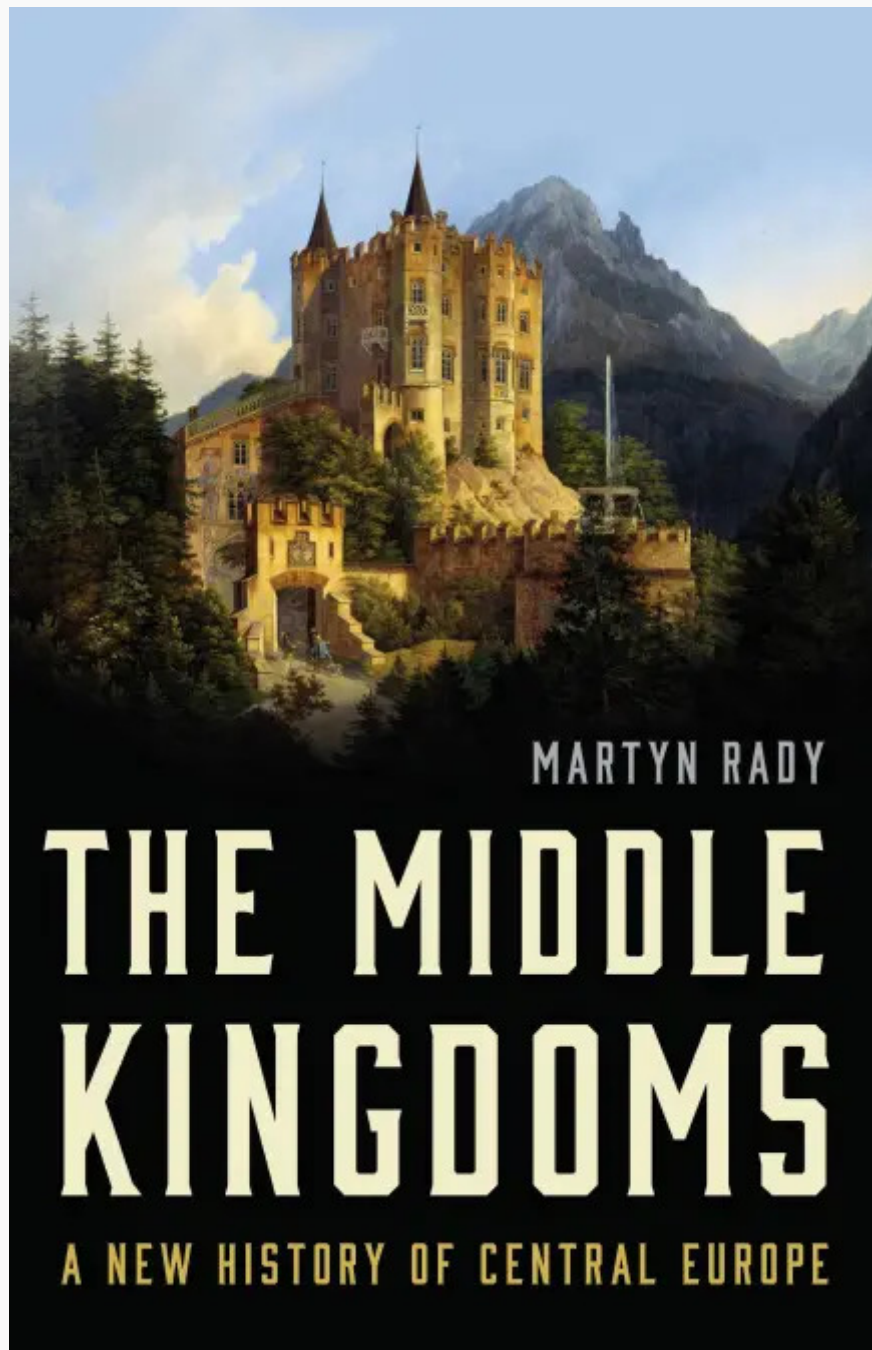
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Middle march

by Jeremy Black

A review of *The Middle Kingdoms: A New History of Central Europe* by Martyn Rady

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Martyn Rady

The Middle Kingdoms: A New History of Central Europe

Basic Books, 640 pages, \$36.00

For Africa, there is a country, the Central African Republic, and for the Americas a recognizable region, Central America. But where is Central Asia or Central Europe? The idea of Central Asia is of note today. Is it a case only of the “stans,” or do we range from Iran to Xinjiang? And how does Central Asia relate to Inner Asia, or indeed the other geographical leads that can be readily offered, whether East or South or, far less commonly, North and West. If you have Central Asia then surely you also have the last two, but, if North Asia is Siberia, what is West Asia? Does it include Turkey, the Middle East, the Caucasus republics, part of Russia and/or the

Arabian peninsula? Or is the Middle East in fact Southwest Asia?

This issue is directly relevant to the subject of Martyn Rady's book *The Middle Kingdoms: A New History of Central Europe*, both in general terms and in specifics. For if West Asia is separate from East Europe, then there is presumably a knock-on effect for wherever Central Europe is supposed to be. Rady argues that although Central Europe's history has much in common with Western Europe's, the respective experiences are different. He claims that Central Europe is defined by a common institutional experience and a similarity of ideas, and seeks to show that in his repeatedly rewarding study. Rady, in his words,

covers the area now included in modern-day Germany, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, and western Romania or Transylvania, but its scope is as fluid as Central Europe's historical parts, venturing at times into the territory of today's Ukraine, Croatia, Switzerland, and the Baltic States.

This, however, is unhelpful. Including regions such as Schleswig-Holstein, let alone Estonia or Crimea and the Donbas, as part of Central Europe suggests a puzzling handling of the issue, which is defined at one point with reference to Central Europe as "the part of Europe that was neither France nor Russia." The possibility of bringing to the fore geological or geographical factors, or elements of culture including cuisine and religion, is therefore not probed adequately.

It is best to avoid thinking of this book as an exploration of the concept of Central Europe, for there is not a treatment here comparable to the methodology and content of Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994) or, to a lesser extent, Richard

Wortman's *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (1995). The Wolff is particularly important for its focus on the role of perception in geographical unitization. At any rate, the concept of Central Europe can be used as one way to distinguish that subject from everything bad supposedly held to reside in Eastern Europe, an approach that has proved particularly attractive to German commentators, and notably in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. From another direction, Central Europe is Eastern Europe with pretensions. Without adequate definitions of both, it is difficult to know whether it is valuable to employ either as a category.

Rady's book succeeds most if we merely consider it a readable and consistently interesting account of the history of part of Europe. He has very little overlap with his first-rate and enjoyable *The Habsburgs* from 2020, instead ranging here from Romans and Huns to the present day, with much of interest in between, including the Mongols, the Reformation, the Josephian reforms, and the First Partition of Poland, culminating in the Vienna peace settlement, which nearly entailed war in 1815 between Austria on one side and Prussia and Russia on the other. There is a particularly

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interesting account of linguistic identities and ethnicities, a continuous theme in history, and also of the problematic nature of nationalism: "National belonging was not a matter of fact but of decision." Nations were not only delineated by the Romantics' visions of language and legend, but were also thought to be biological units.

Despite the somewhat faux medievalism of the title and cover, this book actually has plenty on the twentieth century, and, indeed, reaches to the Ukraine crisis of today. The last century provides an opportunity to consider the impact of rapid territorial changes on the reality and conceptualization of Central Europe. In particular, the successive fall of Austrian and German empires in 1918 and 1945 left a division between West and East that was summarized in terms of Western and Eastern occupation zones in Austria and Germany, and then in the states of West and East Germany. West Germany sought to overcome this with an Ostpolitik, just as, in a very different manner, Germany and the Soviet Union had aligned in the 1920s and, more disastrously, in 1939–41.

Indeed, Rady can be masterly in using theorists and actors, for example Stalin on Hungarians, to condemn themselves in their own words.

How far we can read German attempts to woo Vladimir Putin in the 2000s and 2010s in this geopolitical light is unclear, but, as many Poles have noted, there is a common theme of the Germans ignoring, and even exploiting, other states. Indeed, any sense that Central Europe is some sort of a unit, or has had a

common institutional experience, looks risible in light of German–Polish relations over the centuries. Rather, however we define these various regions, there has been an attempt in Eastern Europe to look beyond Germany to the West, an attempt now understood in terms of seeking links with America. That desire takes precedence over distinctions within Europe. From Finland and Sweden to Ukraine and Moldova, there is a strong sense of a vulnerability to a resurgent Russia. That can lead to concern about pro-Russian tendencies in the rear, notably in Hungary (Central Europe), Serbia (not Central Europe), and, maybe, Germany (Central Europe?). My parenthetical additions make clear the difficulties in applying categories. Indeed, as Rady understands, and heeds in his historical account, it is best to think of geographical and geopolitical categories as loose ones. This matches his perceptive handling of ethnicity, which, as he repeatedly shows, was in reality more complex and overlapping than the crude theorists he correctly criticizes did and have asserted. Indeed, Rady can be masterly in using theorists and actors, for example Stalin on Hungarians, to condemn themselves in their own words.

This book deserves attention. It underlines the extent to which history is unfixed, not least when it comes to political and cultural identities. That (with the exception of part of the Aleutians) America has not experienced conquest and occupation since 1877 and England (with the exception of the Channel Islands) since 1688–89 points up their exceptionalism, but also—as that comment will bring to the fore—the contentious nature still of their histories.

Jeremy Black's books include *A Brief History of the British Monarchy* (Robinson).

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