

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria . By Mary C. Neuburger. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. Pp. xii+307. \$39.95.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/98v653hj>

Journal

The Journal of Modern History, 87(3)

ISSN

0022-2801

Author

Patterson, Patrick Hyder

Publication Date

2015-09-01

DOI

10.1086/682873

Peer reviewed

of, say, Dino Grandi or Italo Balbo. The regime never appealed to anything approaching a majority of the Austrian people, it failed to overcome the ravages of the Depression, and it finished its days in the hands of unimaginative bureaucrats. The Dollfuss-Schuschnigg dictatorship resembled a fascist state in many ways but is probably best characterized as a nasty regime of fascistic wannabes.

EVAN B. BUKEY

University of Arkansas

Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria. By *Mary C. Neuburger*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. Pp. xii+307. \$39.95.

This smart, scrupulous, and elegant volume shows just how much interpretative power and creative reach a carefully executed commodity history can have. *Balkan Smoke* takes up the story of tobacco in a society that, like no other, has been shaped by the plant's production, distribution, consumption, and incorporation into mass and high culture. Moving from Ottoman times through the collapse of communism, the book takes its readers on an engaging and revealing run through the history of the Bulgarians (and, critically, some might-have-been-Bulgarians in the much-disputed borderlands). In the process, Mary Neuburger offers an argument that tobacco and its uses have been important instruments of historical change in Bulgaria: the commodification of the crop continually reshaped economic, social, political, and cultural life, while the shifting forms of its consumption—the deep biological, social, and even ritual dimensions of smoking itself—are shown to have a vital and enduring cultural power that made tobacco use “instrumental in the arrival of *modernity* to the Bulgarian lands” (2).

These are, of course, big claims, and they hold up well in the author's presentation. The account begins with a set of succinct, well-taken conceptual and methodological reflections that demonstrate Neuburger's insistence that this commodity study do justice to the role of both production and consumption. The first two chapters explore the sources, uses, and meanings of tobacco habits as they arose and developed in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ottoman realm and the new autonomous Bulgaria prior to World War I. With deep, deft, and vivid use of contemporary accounts and literary sources, the book offers an intimate acquaintance with the world of late-Ottoman public sociability, rooted in the lively institution of the *kafene*, the coffeehouse meeting spot where political debate, cultural ferment, national stirrings, and interethnic encounters all went forward with the stimulus of healthy doses (or perhaps not) of caffeine and nicotine. The results are fascinating, and they bolster the author's claim that, in the “social life” of tobacco, a sense of emergent Bulgarianness was constructed through, and against, Ottoman and European models and styles. These sensibilities were refined after 1878 in the autonomous Bulgarian principality, as tobacco became a mainstay of the national economy, linking the new state to the international capitalist world system's long chains of supply and demand and making tobacco-rich Macedonia the site of bitter and violent conflict and a prime target of Bulgarian expansionism.

Gender relations and their links to tobacco are never far from the author's attention, and they come to the fore in one of the two chapters on interwar Bulgaria. Here the presentation shifts from the environs of Plovdiv and other production centers and settles, for the most part, in Sofia, where a tobacco-enlivened sociability lay at the heart of a new urban and literary culture that was busily exploring what it meant to be modern and European. Women, too, were increasingly attracted to smoking, and they pushed the boundaries of propriety and

sparked some controversy as they sought their own places in the *kafene* scene. Following this engaging exploration of culture and consumption, the account moves back to a focus on production in a chapter on the remarkable “tobacco fortress” of Arsenovgrad Krepost, which in the “peasant republic” of Alexander Stamboliski’s Bulgarian Agrarian National Union became a left-oriented “paragon of entrepreneurship and cooperative achievement” and then, after the agrarian leader’s murder, proved that the cooperative form could bend to serve the corporatist ends of the state’s new right-wing rulers (114).

Neuburger shows how this and other tobacco businesses—and given the crop’s preeminence, Bulgaria more generally—ended up during the interwar years yoked to transnational commodity chains, commercial networks, and supply-demand forces that left individual enterprises and the broader economy vulnerable to cycles of boom and bust that were often beyond effective domestic management. Tobacco helped make Bulgaria more prosperous and more “modern,” but the world’s tobacco habit made Bulgaria dependent. The consequences of outsiders’ needs and desires become very clear in the chapter on World War II and the run-up to Bulgaria’s involvement in that conflict. German commercial interests sought to maintain favored access to the country’s tobacco supplies, but these collided with the Nazis’ insistence that prominent Jews in the tobacco industry be dispossessed of their property and business influence, part of a broader effort to bring the policies of pro-Axis states into closer alignment with Germany’s antisemitic practices. The war advanced the ethnic Bulgarianization of the tobacco trade, with Jews now pushed out as Greeks and Turks had been shunted aside earlier. And with the occupation of Thrace and Macedonia, war temporarily gave Bulgaria a near monopoly on highly sought-after Oriental tobaccos, making the country the single largest grower of tobacco on the continent.

Two final chapters on the communist period and a brief conclusion on postcommunist developments round out the work, again moving skillfully between the domains of consumption and production. Neuburger shows that despite a number of serious antismoking campaigns mounted by party authorities, tobacco use became, if anything, even more central to Bulgarian sociability and socialist-style leisure, making this truly “a country of smokers” (197). Commercial linkages to the capitalist West were to some extent disrupted, but through the massive Bulgartabak state monopoly, Bulgaria now occupied a valuable position supplying the needs of the communist world—until the collapse of communism opened once-secure markets to Western brands, Western businesses, and even Western broad-leafed tobacco varieties, with dire consequences for the domestic industry.

Balkan Smoke is a thoughtful, innovative work of history writing and, in many ways, a valuable, fresh, and highly original contribution not just to national and regional historiography but to European history and economic history more generally, and to the expanding field of commodity studies. It situates the distinctive Bulgarian experience against the backdrop of profound European and global economic dynamics and consumption practice, continually demonstrating both tobacco’s importance to Bulgaria and Bulgaria’s importance to the big world of tobacco. This is a fine work, truly an exemplar for its genre, and one that will engage a wide range of readers.

PATRICK HYDER PATTERSON

University of California, San Diego