

Book Notes

Stan, Lavinia, ed. 2009. Transitional Justice in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. London: Routledge. Pp. 328. ISBN: 978-0-415-77671-4

For students of transitional justice, be they scholars, policy-makers or the general public, this recent book of Lavinia Stan (editor and chief author) is a timely guide in advancing our understanding of the complex phenomenon of transitional justice. In the field of studying the coming to terms with the dictatorial past in democratising countries, a field which has rapidly expanded over the last 30 years, this book fills important gaps. More than a simple collection of individual country studies, *Transitional Justice...* offers a coherent vision and significantly advances the knowledge in the field.

The book tackles courageously the fundamental question of why some countries choose to deal with past repression (by opening up the archives of the secret police, excluding the representatives of the previous regime from public office, and prosecuting human rights abuses through court trials), while other countries with similar histories of human rights abuses do little to face their past?

As its title indicates, the book deals with the European post-communist region. This region has been partly neglected by the transitional justice literature, which had tended to study in detail countries that have conducted important and transitional justice policies early on in the post-communist period (Germany, Czechoslovakia, but also Poland). Lavinia Stan, however, proves that “non-cases” are as relevant as the exemplary cases for understanding the dynamics of transitional justice. Among the most significant contributions of the book are its detailed studies of countries that were given little or no attention in transitional justice: cases like Albania, Slovenia and the former Soviet Union – the Baltic countries, but also Moldova, Georgia and a host of other former Soviet Republics whose official reckoning with the communist past is almost non-existent. Stan does also a fine presentation of the Romanian case – the best yet in the transitional justice literature. The best-known cases are also examined in great detail, following not only political intent or law promulgation, but also the actual implementation and concrete results of policies, from 1990 up until 2007 – a time span coverage unprecedented in the literature.

But what we believe to be the book’s greatest achievement is its combination of meticulous attention to the particularities of each country and of a theoretical approach that truly offers a better understanding of the post-communist world and of the transitional justice phenomenon. As shown in a concluding section that would endure as a valuable advancement of the field, it is only from attentive observation of the peculiarities of each case that generalities can be drawn. The categories of the early “transitology” literature are shown to be, if not outright obsolete, at least lacking the finesse necessary to understand transitional justice policies and to predict outcomes. Not only the nature of the repression, or the way the regime ended, are relevant for transitional justice; to these factors must be added more complex and dynamic assessments of the “politics of the present,” that is, the make-up of the political landscape at the beginning of transition, as well as its evolution along successive election cycles. Transitional justice was everywhere used as a weapon in the struggle for political power, and a strong connection can be established between the impetus of transitional justice measures and the political parties in government at that time. Lavinia Stan and the contributors give accurate accounts of this dimension and of several others, which combine in a multi-factorial model of explanation of the differences between apparently similar countries.

It is an important contribution, that will for many years be an essential reading for anyone who wants to know why coming to terms with the past is so difficult in the post-communist countries.

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