

# Books

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Villagers from Byelorussia stand by their homes, which have been destroyed by German invaders, 1941

## Temporary lands

**Tim Blanning** takes a historical journey through the countries of Europe that weren't built to last



**Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-forgotten Europe**  
By Norman Davies  
Allen Lane, 800 pages, £30

**N**ORMAN DAVIES' great strength is his ability always to find a fresh angle. The main map illustrating his 1996 general history

of Europe was tilted 90° to shift the reader's perspective from west to east and to show that the geographical centre of the continent is not Brussels but Warsaw. Also subversive was his radical rejection of an Anglocentric approach in his history of the British Isles published three years later.

In his latest revisionist exercise he turns to some of the losers in the "strange jumble of crooked timbers",

as he calls European history. Among the 15 polities that have perished can be found the very big (the USSR) and the very small (Saxe-Coburg-Gotha), the long-lived (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) and the short-lived (the Republic of Carpatho-Ukraine, which lasted for a day in March 1939).

The approach is unashamedly personal, part autobiography, part travelogue and part history. Having travelled to all the sites of his vanished kingdoms, he has plenty to say about their current condition. This can be highly entertaining, as in his spellbinding account of a journey to Halych in what is now Ukraine, in a car driven by an exponent of what he calls the "Red Army driving style" – that is to say, "utterly fearless and completely regardless of human life". Along the way he has picked many good jokes, for example: when the Austrian emperor Francis-Joseph visited the University of Krakow in 1851, the professors had been ordered to stand when the emperor stood and to sit when he sat, so when he slipped on the ice, they all threw themselves to ground.

The jokes are good, but the humour is often of the gallows variety. Much of the book is filled with horrific tales of oppression, slaughter and genocide. The degree of suffering inflicted on the vanished kingdoms of eastern Europe by the Germans and the Soviets after 1938, and recounted here in harrowing detail, has not lost its power to shock. Among other things, we are reminded that Byelorussia had lost around 25 per cent of its total population by 1945. Even then its suffering had not ended, as reintegration into the USSR brought further waves of purges, deportations and killings.

It is not all doom and gloom, however. Davies quotes Rousseau's recommendation to the Poles when they were threatened with partition: "You are likely to be swallowed whole, hence you must take care to ensure that you are not digested." It was advice they took, as did the Baltic states when

invaded by the Soviets in 1940. As Davies observes with a characteristically vivid metaphor: "Fifty years later, like the biblical Jonah, they re-emerged from the belly of the whale, gasping but intact."

This is a very long book, which sharper editing could have abbreviated to advantage, and its contents are very disparate, ranging from fifth-century 'Tolosa' (now south-western France) to late 20th-century Ireland. It is held together by Davies' resolute sympathy for history's losers, supported by his superior literary skills and a host of excellent maps. The book teems with colourful characters, from the

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Visigothic king Theodoric II, whose nasal hair had to be shaved daily, to the pathetic last duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who by 1947 was reduced to scavenging on a rubbish dump.

There are few pages without a memorable turn of phrase or arresting – if sometimes controversial – insight. Never bettered is his epitaph for the Italian royal house: "Just as it had discarded the Duchy of Savoy through a plebiscite, it now lost the Kingdom of Italy through a referendum." Less enthralling are the lengthy narratives of early medieval Scotland or late medieval Aragon, which are heavy going. It was candid but perhaps unwise to write: "Some people find the intricacies of dynastic politics tedious," an observation that certainly had this reader nodding ruefully in agreement.

Rather disappointing is the short final chapter, 'How States Die'. Although this offers a fivefold typology – implosion, conquest, merger, liquidation and 'infant mortality' – it does not penetrate very far. In particular the crucial question of legitimacy, and how it is lost, is not addressed. It is earnestly to be hoped Davies has another, more analytical volume in mind. Another natural sequel would be a history of the EU. **H**



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