Eastern Europe

A Geography of the Comecon Countries

Also by Roy E. H. Mellor

Geography of the USSR
Comecon: Challenge to the West

Eastern Europe

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Roy E. H. Mellor

University of Aberdeen

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1975

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First published 1975 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in New York Dublin
Melbourne Johannesburg and Madras

ISBN 978-0-333-17311-4 ISBN 978-1-349-15559-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-15559-0

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Preface

The copious geographical literature on the Soviet Union in the English language is unmatched by material for the Socialist states of Eastern Europe, which remain relatively little known to English-speaking students. At the present pace of change in Europe, it would be a pity to concentrate our interest on Western Europe and omit to examine the remarkable developments taking place in the other half of Europe. The language problem has certainly been a barrier for most interested people and few of us are fortunate enough to have access to Magyar, Rumanian and the several Slav languages, let alone to Albanian and German. This is unfortunate, because several of the countries have a long, respectable if little known tradition of geographical study and have produced a valuable literature in their own vernaculars. This book has sought in particular to draw on this excellent if relatively inaccessible source material.

For reasons of length it has been decided not to expand on the physical background other than to set a backcloth for the study, and the work is primarily concerned with the complex and diverse human geography. Particular attention has been paid to the historical background, especially in the past two hundred years, since it is felt that the great changes arising from the acceptance of a Marxist–Leninist order of society and economy in the last twenty-five years can only be fully appreciated if seen in their historical setting. Stemming from this approach, the reader may sense the emphasis on the political–geographical pattern, but he will well appreciate that in this part of Europe, with the upheavals of centuries, political geography is a spectre that has to be lived with. Indeed the contemporary scene cannot be adequately interpreted without an understanding of what has gone before. Even a quarter of a century of the rigorous impress of Marxist–Leninism and the more recent changes that have begun to emerge from Comecon cannot conceal the imprint, remarkably fresh in spite of events, left by the great empires that confronted each other in a relentless power struggle over this part of Europe. Attention has also been given to the way in which Sovietisation and the interpretation of Marxist–Leninist dogmas have been remoulding the visible landscape, an aspect of political geography too long given little consideration.

The study of an area so diverse and complex as Eastern Europe presents numerous methodological and interpretive challenges. An initial challenge is to find a thread of identity for the study to make it, some would claim, regionally respectable. This thread seems to be presented by the apparent unity created by the acceptance of Soviet-style Marxist–Leninism and its imposition on divergent ethnic and economic backcloths. In a sense, a new region—Eastern Europe of the eight Socialist states—has emerged from what were previously a part of Central Europe (in itself an elusive concept), and the Balkans, sometimes more generously defined spatially as South-eastern Europe, besides the true eastern marchlands of Europe that lap into the Soviet Union. With eight countries at different levels of social and economic development and possessing sub-

stantial organisational divergences, the treatment must naturally be a little uneven, but every attempt has been made to give a reasonably equal coverage of each country in relation to its size and diversity and its role in the area's affairs. The deficiencies are most apparent in the statistical material, both on a comparative scale between countries and over time, especially for those countries that have undergone violent territorial change.

The work owes much to many helpful people in Eastern Europe, too numerous to name. I might, however, mention especially Professor Dušan Brkić of Sarajevo whose wide conceptual view of the problems of Europe's Socialist states has been a long-standing inspiration. Dorota and Manfred Alexander of the University of Cologne have combed Eastern Europe's bookshops for me. For my own travels I owe a grateful acknowledgement of help received from the Carnegie Trust for Scotland. Much laborious compilation was done by my assistant, Miss Sheila Bain, while the maps were produced by Laurie McLean and Bert Bremner, the quality of whose work will be readily appreciated. The manuscript was typed by Mrs I. J. Greig, who mastered with incredible success the eccentricities to the British eye of Slav and Magyar spelling. Whenever my spirit has flagged I have been grateful for the encouragement received from colleagues, particularly Kenneth Walton and Alistair Smith. The latter along with Chalmers Clapperton gave noble help in reading a remarkably illegible series of drafts. Much of the original encouragement came from my wife, whose intimate knowledge of the Slav lands, their peoples and languages, has been invaluable. She has also done so much of the drearier tasks of reading manuscripts and checking text, besides using her culinary skills without which no energy-consuming author can survive. For errors, slips and deficiencies, I alone am responsible.

Roy E. H. Mellor