

Book Review

R. Keith Schoppa. *The Twentieth Century: A World History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. x + 175. \$24.95 (hardcover).

R Keith Schoppa's book *The Twentieth Century: A World History* is an ambitious project, as any short work seeking to cover an entire century would be. As part of the New Oxford World History series, which emphasizes global "connectedness and interactions of all kinds ... involving people, places, and processes,"¹ Schoppa places questions of identity at the center of his work. He distinguishes three types of "personal-political identities: ... the individual and the local, the nation-state, and global communities" (1). Using conflicts between identities as the drivers of his narrative of the events of the twentieth century, he introduces individuals to explore historical change; some of these are persons of historical importance but many are not, and hence offer a glimpse into how historical events affected and shaped individual lives.

The book is divided into chronological chapters, breaking the century up into meaningful and manageable sections: The Great War and Social Change, 1900-1919 (13-31); Claustrophobia: Totalitarianism and the Great Depression, 1920-1936 (32-50); Worlds Blown Apart, 1937-1949 (51-70); A New Day? Revolution, Cold War, and Decolonization, 1950-1965 (71-92); Struggling for Equality, Freedom, and Peace, 1966-1979 (93-110); Bright Triumphs, Dark Disasters, 1980-1991 (111-129); and Written on the Darkest Pages of History, 1991-2000 (130-149). With a good number of historical photographs accompanying the text, chapters have about 15 pages of text, further illustrated with quotes from letters and literary works, as well as speeches, newspaper articles, and statistics. The focus on people and their identities is a great tool to make history approachable for the book's intended undergraduate audience, especially on the scale of global history and an entire century. The clear structure, length of the chapters, and the use of vignettes on individuals greatly help with that. The book is decidedly unlike a textbook with its stories of people and with its emphasis on the connections between disparate places.

Schoppa weaves a narrative around events and persons that forgoes the traditional frames of adversaries, familiar to most historians: no talk of Central Powers versus Entente in the First World War, little mention of the confrontation between Axis

and Allies, and only the briefest of explanations on the global Cold War. For the author of this review, this was surprising since the ideological confrontations inherent in these oppositions are useful starting points to explore the contradictions and complexities of the antagonisms, binary as they might be. That said, Schoppa's approach is fresh and permits, in theory, a more nuanced treatment of large-scale developments, as well as the inclusion of a greater diversity of themes and places. In practice, the book neglects the confrontations of ideas and ideologies that shaped the twentieth century, but the narrative of competing identities that, supposedly, replaces the great-power narrative, lacks explanatory power. Schoppa attempts to balance the human experiences, and the commonalities between people's lives, with the broader historical narrative, yet this weakens his narrative since causality and motivation are often missing. For example, explaining the attraction of fascism in interwar Europe, or of communism as a means to fight colonialism, would have served to connect ideologies with people's lives—after all, the individuals at the center of the narrative made choices based on their political beliefs—yet these connections are not explored. In fact, while the nation-state and global connections are recurring themes, local identities are much less important in the book. Not only do these receive scant attention, they are also not clearly distinguished from national identities, nor are identities in general defined in a manner that would permit the student-reader to use them as analytical tools beyond the book.

Schoppa moves through the century at high speed. Nothing less would work for the vast historical terrain that he covers in his book. Yet this also results in several problematic aspects: the density of the text comes at the price of readability; the powerful photographs are not integrated into the text; and the lack of subheadings means that the narrative appears at times jumpy and disjointed. Unnecessary cliffhangers make for some flair, but have no probative value. A lack of clarity further comes from his use of terminology; perhaps the inclusion of a glossary at the end of the volume would have helped with that.

The book's appendix includes a timeline with events of the twentieth century and a section on further reading. Both are largely confined to the book's themes and reflect many of the sources on which Schoppa relied in his text. There is also a list of websites, mostly large-scale projects and archival collections, listing documents on the themes of the book and constituting a truly useful addition for further exploration.

It is reaching for the lowest hanging fruit to enumerate all the things that are missing from a 200-page treatment of a century, and there is no need to point out that Schoppa could have included so many more things (since in the end, these would have made the book longer). What is sorely missing, though, is actual global coverage. Other than in the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Latin America is painfully absent from most of the book. Asia only consists of the places with which we are familiar from the themes of more traditional textbooks: Japanese imperialism, Communist China, Indian partition, the Vietnam Wars, and decolonization on the Malay Peninsula. Coverage on

the genocide of the Rohingya in the early twenty-first century is a bonus. The African continent consists of a great vignette on the Herero genocide in the early twentieth century, a number of sections on South Africa, and the Mau Mau uprising / Kenyan independence (while omitting the lengthy quest for recognition and compensation from the British government for the atrocities committed by the colonial government). Australia is mentioned once in the text. Schoppa missed the opportunity to use decolonization as a starting point to discuss the global inequalities that shape our world today, by connecting colonialism and decolonization to the persistence of the exploitation of human and natural resources on most of the African continent and in much of Asia and Central America today. Writing about industrial production and practices, and about the impact that extractive industries and cheap production have on the people of South and Southeast Asia, of Central America, and of vast parts of Africa, would have permitted a more direct connection between the twentieth and the twenty-first century, showcasing how the global north continues to dominate the global south. He offers a glimpse into this issue when writing about competing women's movements in the developed world and developing countries (97-98) but does not use this opportunity to connect these themes.

If the geographical scope of the book is unsatisfying for this reviewer, the thematic breadth is perhaps its most praiseworthy aspect. In addition to the broad political, economic, and geopolitical explorations of a historical survey, Schoppa includes in his narrative important socio-cultural developments that enable him to connect large-scale historical developments with the personal lives of individuals. These are also themes that should resonate with the young audience to whom his text is geared: civil rights movements seeking equality between the sexes and races, the abolition of the illegality of homosexuality, spirituality, literature, as well as technological and medical development, just to name a few. One important recurring theme is genocide, exploring the sheer violence of the century. These are not merely illustrations of other themes, but issues treated in their own right. When Schoppa introduces, for example, the writings of Lu Xun and Garcia Lorca, grappling with the social and cultural problems of the post-First World War in their respective societies, China and Spain (38-39 and 49-50), he gives them a voice beyond the political developments of the 1920s, bringing not only the time period to life but also showcasing how individuals across the world found themselves in similar circumstances and how they sought to come to terms with them. Putting people in disparate corners of the world on an equal footing is meaningful for establishing the humanity of the people of the past and will help the students of the twenty-first century relate to history on a more individual and personal level.

Overall, Schoppa's book successfully showcases how a broad narrative of twentieth-century history can still incorporate individual lives and compelling stories. It is an engaging non-textbook that should help undergraduate students find ways to

connect to the past century and its people, even though its use in the classroom should be in conjunction with lectures and other readings that endow students with the vocabulary and conceptual frameworks needed to understand the twentieth century historically.

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Notes

¹ New Oxford World History, Oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/n/new-oxford-world-history-nowh/?cc=es&lang=en&>