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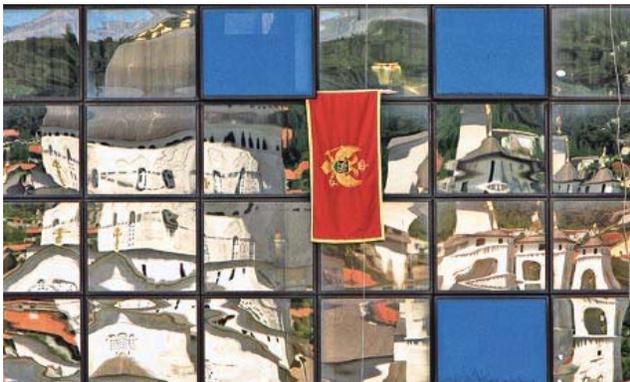
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# Vanished Kingdoms by Norman Davies - review

A study of Europe that suggests we can take nothing for granted



**Timothy Snyder**  
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Orthodox church reflected in a modern building in Podgorica, Montenegro Photograph: Dimitar Dilhoff/AFP/Getty Images

What might European history be? At the moment we tend to confuse the convivial humming of the hives of international working groups with actual harmony. The European memory industry functions happily within the protective walls of the EU, never quite transcending the national historical traditions that it is supposed to simultaneously respect and undo. As everyone involved must know, the idea of a composite, multinational European history is both politically and intellectually impossible. Each national history sustains its own totality and coherence precisely in the way it ignores or exploits the histories of neighbours. Romanticism, it seems, is the root problem. In moments of real political crisis or artificially generated political anxiety (anniversaries), national history insists that past suffering confers significance on present problems – a romantic idea if ever there was one. In this vision, history is a kind of vertical line cast down from the present to the past, a dark heartstring to be pulled.

**Vanished Kingdoms:  
The History of Half-  
Forgotten Europe**  
by Norman Davies

Norman Davies is certainly a romantic, and yet his *Vanished Kingdoms* proposes a powerful solution to the



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problem of European history. How can this be? Romanticism, as [Isaiah Berlin](#) suggested, can also work as a matter of principled respect for variety rather than insistence on difference, a gaze through a stained-glass window rather than the grip on a bit of glass. What if, instead of parallel vertical lines plumbing darkness, we thought of history horizontally? What if we saw historical pluralism not as the attempt to respect all possible national myths, but as regard for the simultaneous existence, at any given historical point, of all states and peoples – including those that no longer exist, or have been forgotten? There were, after all, a thousand Greek city-states, and it says much about us that we can only name a couple of them.

The romanticism of Norman Davies has always been compensatory rather than national. In his first two books, he insisted that states that once existed – the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth of 1569-1795 and the interwar Polish republic of 1919-1939 – mattered in their own times, just as their destruction mattered for later times. Today Poland is in a more prosperous and secure position than ever before in its long history. In the past two decades Davies has turned his searchlight on subjects smaller or larger – the Warsaw uprising of 1944, the city of Wrocław/Breslau, the British Isles, Europe itself – always with the intention of underlining that which, or those who, have been left out. Here in *Vanished Kingdoms* compensation is no longer an impulse but a thoughtful and ecumenical principle. Davies is writing only about states that no longer exist, regardless of whether or not he finds them sympathetic, and regardless of whether they are remembered or forgotten. What all states have in common, like all humans, is Shelley's lone and level sands.

This is a greater intellectual challenge than it might seem. The past is usually organised, implicitly or explicitly, around a present that is associated with life. But what if the present moment is the one thing that we cannot really understand? This is, and indeed must be, the true historian's attitude: the present is the hurly-burly or emotional overstimulus and unavailable sources, the past offers some hope of calm understanding. But if that is true, how can historians possibly orient the past towards the present, the known towards the unknown? We can't, actually. Davies presents the present at the beginnings of chapters in brief, deliberately transient vignettes, sometimes resembling a travel guide to the New Europe (visit Montenegro before the rush begins, consider Belarus if you can do without amenities, but feel free to give Kaliningrad a pass). What he knows about the present is the one lesson that can be securely drawn from the political past: if "the lifespan of even the mightiest states is finite," then all of the polities we take for granted will pass, perhaps sooner

than we think, and no doubt quickly enough that organising the whole past to justify their existence is utter nonsense.

To make of dead states the main subject of European history is also an enormous writerly challenge. Usually historical writing works because of a discrete link between literature and politics: the narrative of rise-fall-rise works well as both national literature and national politics, that of decline-fall-lessons learned does the same for empire. Davies is certainly one of the best British historical writers of the past half century, and every gauntlet he throws down is bejewelled. His literary gifts and his capacity for what he nicely calls "imaginative sympathy" are stretched to their limits by this challenging project. He eschews most of the traditional sources of coherence, deliberately (it seems to me) separating chapters whose subject matters are related. There are studies of Lithuania, Galicia, Ruthenia and Prussia, all of which are closely linked to one another and to the broader history of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth and the Russian, German, and Austrian empires that supplanted it, all of which are nevertheless separated by chapters about distant lands.

Some of the portraits are of great significance because the states in question really have been forgotten, as with the old British *Alt Clud*, the Kingdom of the Rock. The studies of Burgundy and Aragon, true powers in their time, recall wonderfully the sheer thickness of medieval political history. I missed studies of Khazaria and other non-Christian states. Davies is clearly unsympathetic to the Bourbons and other centralisers. The study of Savoy and Italy is plainly meant to suggest the present-day frailty of continental nation-states, and that of Ireland ends with the forecast of the demise, in coming decades, of the United Kingdom. This is clearly a book that arises from the present moment, although not in the traditional way oriented to it, ensconced in the concerns of the two decades between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the crisis of the euro. The crucial issue that it seems to miss, relevant to both ancient and modern states, is that of revenue: how to maintain both the loyalty and the productivity of subjects or citizens? It is hard not to wonder about this question, for some historians because it seems crucial to a certain financial and bureaucratic transition to modernity, for others because revenue was the crucial issue in the ancient world as in the modern.

Yet Davies succeeds, and it is quite a success, in preserving the past as a rough guide to an uncertain future, rather than besieging it as a predictor of the uncontrollable present. It is superficially a book of its time; it is deeply a book about how we should think about time. He sees through the present, and thereby gives us a way to experience history as duration. Just as each living person stands in front of dozens of dead, each of today's UN member-states stands before a rank of the polities that have passed. But although states have died and will die, in the meantime the entire globe has been covered by sovereign, if no doubt uneven, statehood. Thus the end of states,

even those as important as the USSR or the UK, cannot be the end of history, but only its continuation.

- Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* is published by Bodley Head.

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