

# RSAA JOURNAL

## Book Review by Christene D'Anca

(University of California, Santa Barbara)

Kaplan, Robert D. *In Europe's Shadow: Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey Through Romania and Beyond*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2016, 269 pp.

Few books have been written about Europe in which Romania is a central entity, and even fewer with a mass audience in mind. Robert Kaplan's *In Europe's Shadows* brings Romania into the light, positioning it as a key to understanding the rest of Eastern Europe, and its larger relationship to the west. The book elides the label of any single genre, and successfully combines memoir, journalism, diary, travelogue, and historical narrative, among a handful of others. At first such richness seemingly detracts from the larger scope of the work that aims to accurately portray the multiple facets of Romania, leaving the reader lurching between pieces of information about an already unfamiliar topic. However, it does not take long to get used to the pace of the text, and the seemingly haphazard presentation becomes reflective of its subject – Romania had spent decades in a state of turmoil, continuously coping and redefining itself. The jagged approach to telling Romania's story from this perspective makes perfect sense.

Romania captured Kaplan's attention in the 1970's, and in 1981 he began documenting the country in earnest. Over a sequence of trips that spanned over two decades he compiled a series of impressions from an ever-changing country. Kaplan's assembly of narratives began during the worst points of communism that left him with little less to document than disparity and terror. His details and anecdotes got him banned from the county until after the fall of communism in 1989, at which point he returned, and continued recording the ways the country had changed. The descriptions provided for this period of transition make it appear as though it was Kaplan's favorite period in Romanian recent history – a time when the country was trying to find itself and did not adhere to any single ideology. However, it did not take long for the nation to find its bearings and develop into an Eastern European powerhouse on par with long-established Western nations.

# RSAA JOURNAL

*In Europe's Shadows* employs every technique at Kaplan's disposal in order to approach Romania's story from disparate angles and represent it as complexly as it exists. The book's richness and variety are its strength. However, Kaplan's heavy reliance on his own, albeit well documented and knowledgeable voice renders the work too personal for mass consumption. His impressions do not always resonate with those who have endured communism, nor do they translate to those who have visited the country in passing – they are strictly his own. Nevertheless, if one can overcome the biased adjectives and sometimes confusing language, Kaplan's unique representation of Romania serves as a powerful reminder of the role the country has played in world politics during, and since the communist era.

## Notes:

Robert David Kaplan is a distinguished political author of sixteen books, with several other shorter publications. He was born in New York, earned his BA in English at the University of Connecticut, after which he spent much of his life traveling between countries and forming ideas about world affairs. He has served in numerous diplomatic positions, and his innovative ideas have earned him accolades in the political world. He has also held various academic positions across the country as guest lecturer, or visiting professor, both at military and government facilities, as well as major universities.

"[A] haunting yet ultimately optimistic examination of the human condition as found in Romania . . . Kaplan's account of the centuries leading up to the most turbulent of all—the twentieth—is both sweeping and replete with alluring detail."—**Alison Smale, *The New York Times Book Review***

"This book reveals the confident, poetical Kaplan . . . but also a reflective, political Kaplan, seeking at times to submerge his gift for romantic generalization in respectful attention to the ideas of others."—**Timothy Snyder, *The Washington Post***

"A serious yet impassioned survey of Romania . . . Kaplan is a regional geographer par excellence."—**The Christian Science Monitor**

<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/240357/in-europes-shadow-by-robert-d-kaplan/9780812986624/>

