

Books on Twentieth-Century Transylvania

Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town. By Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancea. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 504 pp.

Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II. By Holly Case. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. xix + 349 pp.

The reviewer who undertakes to write about books important to his field years after their publication faces an unenviable task. And yet he can turn this into an advantage, too, by analyzing not only the works themselves but also the scholarly debates that have emerged about them. This is my aim below in the case of a book by Rogers Brubaker and his coauthors, as well as one by Holly Case. Notwithstanding differences in theme and methodology—Brubaker and his coauthors are sociologists and anthropologists, Case a historian specializing in twentieth-century Eastern and Central Europe—identifying the similarity between the two works' main areas of interest is easy enough. At the core of both is the question of how everyday people have experienced Romanian-Hungarian ethnic conflicts in Transylvania, especially in Cluj-Napoca, the region's unofficial capital as well as its cultural center.

What theoretical context do the authors set their research in? Brubaker's starting point is a thesis he'd developed in previous essays—namely, that understanding twentieth-century ethnic conflicts means abandoning the traditional perspective of groupism, which posits majority and minority populations alike as comprising compact, homogenous communities. In his view, in Transylvania—which he considers one of Europe's "ethnic border zones"—identity, and group identity in particular, is fundamentally a constructed, continuously rearticulated and reinterpreted concept. This is not at all surprising in light of various identity theories prevalent today.

Brubaker et al. focus primarily on a microanalysis of Cluj in the transitional decade after Romania's 1989 revolution. They proceed on the basis of the notion that an ethnic group's workings are determined not by the rational acts of individuals or by the groups and "identities" themselves, but by external circumstances and processes. They undertake an analytical disaggregation of

the cornerstones of both the Hungarian and Romanian communities under the administration of nationalist mayor Gheorghe Funar. Their methodology is thus novel in some notable respects. In contrast with most scholarship, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* examines not the nationalist discourse of elites, but rather seeks to determine when and how ethnicity emerges in the everyday discourse of “everyday people.”

The book comprises two sharply different sections. The first chapters cast the lens of political and diplomatic history on a summing up of the Hungarian-Romanian rivalry over Transylvania as it has unfolded since 1848, while the remaining two-thirds of the work present the results of anthropological fieldwork. Several critics (e.g., D. József Lőrincz and Andrew Ludányi) have noted that the book’s historical overview fails to form an organic whole with the anthropological analysis that follows.¹ In their view, this is because that early section addresses the issue solely from “above”—presenting the methods and outcomes of nationalist politics from the era of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, which established a dual monarchy, to that of national communism—and in doing so it runs counter to the book’s regularly expressed objectives. I concur that the quality of the historical narrative does fall victim to the “dialogue of the deaf” represented by Hungarian historiography on the one hand and Romanian on the other, while not taking a stance on most of the issues disputed to this day; and that this section consequently falls far short of the relatively nuanced anthropological and sociological analysis that follows. The very posing of the question—Transylvania as an “ethnic periphery,” as borrowed from the work of László Kürti—seems problematical.² After all, is it its peripheral nature that Transylvania has to thank for its status as a multinational region? Or rather, is this status the result of the region having long represented a strategic, “central” territory not only for Hungarian and Romanian nation-building that unfolded simultaneously, but also in the struggle between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires?

The book’s chronicling of events includes some debatable conclusions: according to the authors, it was Hitler who forced the Romanian government to

1 József D. Lőrincz, “A kolozsvári magyarok társadalma” [The Cluj Hungarian Community], *Regio* 19, no. 2 (2008): 240–56; Andrew Ludányi, “Rezension zu: Case, Holly: *Between States. The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II*. Stanford 2009.” *H-Soz-u-Kult*, April 6, 2010, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2010-2-015>, accessed December 17, 2012.

2 László Kürti, *Remote Borderland. Transylvania in the Hungarian Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

accept the re-assign Northern Transylvania, and with it, Cluj, to Hungary—as set forth in the Second Vienna Award on August 30, 1940. In contrast, Béni L. Balogh convincingly argues that in fact it was Bucharest that initiated the arbitration by Germany and Italy concerning the contested territories, though he acknowledges that the ensuing decision caught Romanian public opinion off guard to say the least.³ I myself have likewise found lacking the chapter addressing the effects of the 1956 Hungarian revolution on Transylvania, including Cluj-Napoca (in Hungarian *Kolozsvár*; hereinafter referred to as Cluj, as commonly known), as it pertains to the ethnic politics of the Romanian communist regime; for example, more attention might have been devoted to the emaciation of Hungarian-language higher education and/or judicial measures that spread fear through the Hungarian intelligentsia. It seems that the sort of mixed ideological-autocratic regime represented by Romanian national communism from the 1960s is still a formidable challenge for scholars of nationalism. Indeed, the Romanian regime departed only in part from the Soviet model in successfully integrating society with a modernizing, nation-building paradigm, while increasingly isolating and forcing to the sidelines members of non-Romanian ethnic groups (but without ever openly persecuting them).

The book's historical overview draws on works that for decades now have shaped scholars' conceptions of Transylvania. It should be added, however, that the authors cite neither the "literature of offense"—which aimed chiefly to expose the Ceaușescu regime's most egregious policies toward ethnic Hungarians—nor analyses that appeared on the subject in international journals, penned by scholars of the sociology of nationalism and by political scientists.⁴

The second half of *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* examines the everyday relations between ethnic groups in Cluj in the late 1990s. While most would assume that ethnicity is experienced in similar fashion by the city's Romanian majority and its Hungarian minority (which comprises nearly a fifth of the population), the authors argue that this is far from being

3 Béni L. Balogh, *A magyar román kapcsolatok 1939–1940-ben és a második bécsi döntés* [Hungarian-Romanian Relations and the Second Vienna Award, 1939–1940] (Csíkszereda: Pro Print, 2002), appeared in English in a revised and expanded edition: *The Second Vienna Award and the Hungarian–Romanian Relations, 1940–1944* (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs; New York: Distributed by Columbia University Press, 2011).

4 Robert R. King, *Minorities under Communism: Nationalities as a Source of Tension among Balkan Communist States* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973); Robert R. King, *A History of the Romanian Communist Party* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1980); Bennet Kovrig, *Communism in Hungary: From Kun to Kadar* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1979); Stephen Borsody, ed., *Hungarians: A Divided Nation* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988).

the case. Various modes of research—including conversations with focus groups, unstructured dialogues, public opinion surveys, and formal interviews—show that the Romanian identity of the majority population remains virtually “unmarked.” Its near imperceptibility may stem from the fact that to the city’s Romanian residents, their own community is self-evident; indeed, they perceive even the rhetoric of their nationalist mayor with a surprising indifference even while having re-elected him no fewer than three times. (Yet another question left unexamined by Brubaker et al. is the state’s role in developing and reinforcing the “natural” majority identity.)

In contrast, the experience of minority, Hungarian identity—especially in the Funar era, what with its nationalist and anti-Hungarian rhetoric and reprisals against ethnic Hungarians—means that their own ethnic identity is far more on the minds of members of the Hungarian community than it is for their ethnic Romanian peers. In sum: the city’s Hungarians are more “ethnic” in their overall behavior and, more specifically, in reacting to various challenges life throws at them than are their Romanian counterparts. Amid these observations, Brubaker et al. also articulate two important theses concerning the strategies by which persons living in interethnic communities navigate their way about their everyday lives. According to the first, field research does not support the rather popular assertion among Hungarians that having the “appropriate” ethnic background is a determining factor in the local, Romanian business sector and labor market. Brubaker and his coauthors argue that personal connections (including those made in the course of higher education) are far more determinative in the professional networks of present-day Cluj, and indeed they observe that on this front the field of movement between the two ethnic communities is surprisingly wide—as suggested also by the high rate of intermarriage and, more generally, the increasingly tendency to look beyond one’s own ethnic group in selecting a significant other). In this respect (too), the post-1989 situation differs considerably from the parallel and mutually exclusive efforts at nation-building that prevailed between the two world wars and during the Ceaușescu era. And yet in unstructured conversations, elusive replies are surprisingly frequent among everyday people when asked to comment on identity or ethnic conflicts. It might be added that avoiding conflict situations or deliberately understating their significance is part and parcel of the tacit “live and let live” philosophy that has come to prevail in Transylvania over the course of history. Indeed, not even when it seems that the Hungarian-language media is saturated with news reinforcing the idea of mutually exclusive ethnic discourse do such persons

fully accept this. The rich fabric of interethnic personal connections no doubt contributes substantially to this skepticism.

The second key thesis concerns the regeneration of local and “pan-national” Hungarian identity. According to Brubaker et al. this is not some sort of elite-oriented political project but simply a matter of everyday practice. Hungarians in Cluj defend their institutions not out of a “sense of mission” or because that’s what the Hungarian-language media and the Hungarian political party suggest that they do. Rather, they do so much more so because the existence of a “Hungarian world”—one neither exclusive or ghettoizing, yet still demarcates a certain ethnic dividing line—renders Hungarian ethnic identity natural and erases attendant fears. Of course, the question thus arises: if the Hungarian identity held by Cluj Hungarians is not the result of conscious decision-making but simply that of their socialization, can it be pronounced that it is a “spontaneous” and imperceptible process by which most people become “ethnic”? To quote Walker Connor, we might even say that ethnic identity sometimes becomes vitally important, while at other times it is a secondary factor in everyday life.⁵

On the whole, the second half of the book provides an incomparably rich analysis of the everyday lives of the residents of Cluj and of the problems they face; not least, their hopes and disappointments amid the country’s political and economic transformation. Given its sensitive portrayal of the new discourse that has developed about the social role of ethnicity, the striking omission of local, Transylvanian scholarship is hard to fathom. For instance, the coauthors do not so much as mention the work of the most important centers of sociological research in Transylvania, the Center for Regional and Anthropological Research in Miercurea-Ciuc (in Hungarian *Csíkszereda*), led by Zoltán A. Biró—namely, its research into the relationship between the “upper” and the “lower” world and the everyday reception of elite discourse in Hungarian-majority Szekler Land (in Hungarian *Székelyföld*). Not only do Biró’s insights from the 1990s echo those of Brubaker et al., but they also came well before them and evidently inspired them, too. It would thus have been more appropriate to acknowledge this. Further, Cluj might have been analyzed in comparison with another “ethnic” region of symbolic significance in an effort to identify similarities and differences. But the most salient theoretical and methodological issue arising from *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* is its failure to address the workings of state institutions from the local level on up—especially striking given that

5 Walker Connor, “When is a Nation?” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13 (1990): 92–103.

one consequence of state involvement is the “identity-less” local Romanian population. In my assessment, the book’s close-up analysis of individual Cluj resident need not have excluded consideration of the state workings vis-à-vis the issue of ethnicity. This is mainly because internal surveys taken in the 1990s showed that the mayor’s office, as well as the county administration and other branches of government (e.g., the tax agency, the court, the police, and the military) were far from “neutral”—neither in their make-up (ethnic Hungarians are underrepresented several times over relative to their proportion of the population) nor in their relations with the public/clients. All this is pertinent here not because it serves to maintain a “discourse of offense” among Hungarians, but rather, because without an analysis of everyday conflicts—not infrequently, small acts of ethnically motivated humiliation—Hungarians’ palpable “sensitivity” would remain inexplicable. And this sensitivity stems from Hungarians’ experience of the everyday workings of the arms of the state, not from sheer prejudice.

Holly Case’s *Between States* likewise analyzes Transylvania at a critical stage of its modern history along with the related Romanian-Hungarian competition. Her methodology, however, stands closer to that employed in the fields of social history and the history of ideas when addressing World War II as a truly “total” phenomenon in Eastern and Central Europe.⁶ Her volume—a substantially revised version of the PhD dissertation she defended in 2004—focuses chiefly on events between 1940 and 1944, in what is a stellar blend of classic diplomatic history with microhistory. With the collapse of the peace that prevailed after Versailles and the start of World War II, both Romania—as the defender of the prevailing territorial status quo—and Hungary, one of the big losers of the post-World War I peace, each found themselves in uncharted waters. Even before the Second Vienna Award, the two countries were struggling to gain the favor of an expanding Germany promulgating a “new European order,” and from autumn 1940 to summer 1944 they engaged in a mostly weaponless, but not victimless battle for possession of a divided Transylvania; and within it, the region’s capital, Cluj. The book’s opening chapters authoritatively introduce the

6 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: the Destruction of the Jewish Community at Jevabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire. Hitler’s Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 2008); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). For the Holocaust in Romania and the Jewish policies of the Antonescu regime, see Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

reader to the diplomatic and historical background of the Transylvania question. Drawing on an imposing range of archival material and scholarship in several languages, Case handily demonstrates that while a state of war never did formally exist between Romania and Hungary, throughout World War II they prepared to attack each other while at the same time waging war on the German side on the Soviet front. Indeed, the two allies entered the war primarily not against the USSR or Bolshevism, but above all for Transylvania. As early as the end of 1941, Hungarian propaganda organs directed journalists not to take a position on the preferred outcome of the war. Meanwhile, in Romania in March 1942, Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu admitted to German negotiators that his country's sole true war objective was regaining control of Northern Transylvania. According to Case, in the interest of the "matter" the sides approached ideological nihilism several times. When, after the Second Vienna Award, the foreign minister of the far-right Iron Guard-backed Romanian government raised the issue of the famous British historian R. W. Seton-Watson, who had long been in the employ of Bucharest but who was regarded by intelligence as an "English spy," Ion Antonescu personally intervened on behalf of Seton-Watson, saying he "has been a good friend of Romania," who "always supported us in the matter of Transylvania." He added "his democratic activities don't interest me" (p.65). Case argues that even on the Hungarian side, the defense of Transylvania was capable of overriding every other ideological debate; for, she says, between the two world wars the whole of Hungary's political elite, from the far left to the far right, concurred when it came to territorial revisionism. Case demonstrates this through the example of a military officer who first served the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (aka the Hungarian Republic of Councils) in 1919 and subsequently the regime of Admiral Miklós Horthy, and took part in Hungary's military operation in Northern Transylvania. (It would have been more exact to take Martin Mevius's research into account and thus make more nuanced assertions as regards leftist parties' take on territorial revisionism; for the Budapest communist movement and the Transylvanian left were equally divided when it came to the Horthy regime's policies toward Romania.⁷) Albeit in varying tones, Hungarian and Romanian opinion-makers—politicians, diplomats, scholars, and journalists—employed similar reasoning in discussing the nation-building role of Transylvania. Roland Clark rightly pointed out that one of the

⁷ Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism, 1941–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

daring arguments Case makes in her book is that underlying the struggle for Transylvania—as with many other twentieth-century conflicts—was not some sort of ideological incompatibility, but much rather a fundamental agreement as to the framework of what constituted a legitimate nation-state.⁸ It is precisely this, in her view, that led to mutually exclusive conceptions as to the borders of a future Europe. Indeed, Case places the Transylvania question in a much wider context than has scholarship to date, examining the Hungarian-Romanian conflict in the context of the military and diplomatic battle waged over the “idea of Europe.” Not surprisingly, from 1940 to 1944 hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles, special issues of periodicals, and speeches drew a link between the fate of Transylvania and the structure of the emerging “new Europe.” Such figures as Anton Golopenția and Sabin Manuilă, along with their Hungarian foes, Pál Teleki and András Rónai, were thus not only nationalist cartographers and geographers but also public officials who saw their own nation’s territorial disputes in a pan-European context.

While Case’s book is a must for those who study this region, rather than presenting a more detailed summary I would now draw attention to the book’s key strengths and a few, minor deficiencies. In my assessment the high point comes in the third chapter, which examines the everyday consequences of the 1940 territorial revision on Cluj following its re-assignment to Hungary. With striking sensitivity and empathy Case analyzes the dilemmas of “the four years.” She examines refugee issues, property disputes, racial discrimination, attempts at assimilation, the fate of Greek Orthodox residents, the state’s “nation-building” apparatus, and the increasingly strained relationship between everyday citizens inhabiting the gray zone between ethnic groups. Drawing on research she conducted in the state archives in Cluj, Case lavishly documents the relentless battle for people’s loyalty. Pointing to the several hundred criminal cases brought between 1940 and 1942 for “offending the nation,” she demonstrates that often it was not ideologically motivated deliberateness that caused the “crime” (usually an offensive remark against Hungarians or Hungarianness), but small missteps of everyday life, such as inebriation or an otherwise innocent verbal spat on the street. The least successful part of the book comes, I think, in the fifth chapter: a discussion of the Romanian and the Hungarian Holocaust. While even here, Case demonstrates an impressive command of the facts, drawing on an exceptionally

8 Roland Clark, “Review of Case, Holly, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II*,” HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010. <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30001>, accessed December 17, 2012.

wide breadth of sources, her book falls short in its less than suitable positioning of the tragedy befell Romanian and Hungarian citizens identified as Jews into the struggle waged between Romanians and Hungarians for the “European idea.” While true that the competition to gain favor with the great powers—a race in which the possession of Transylvania played a key role—it also determined the two countries’ policies toward the Jews. In 1941, Hungary and Romania, each wanting to gain the favor of Nazi Germany, simultaneously—and with an eye constantly on each other—enacted numerous anti-Jewish civil and economic measures. In the wake of this, as a “gesture” toward the Western powers, from autumn 1942 Bucharest halted the deportation of Transnistrian Jews that had been underway since summer 1941; while in Budapest, for nearly two years the government led by Miklós Kállay successfully resisted Germany’s deportation plans.⁹ Case makes a noteworthy observation in writing that during World War II the “solution” of the “Jewish question” was often bound up with efforts to settle the territorial issues inherited from the post-World War I peace. It is not worth depicting World War II diplomacy as an anomaly in international relations, according to Case. To the contrary, she says, it must be acknowledged that Nazi Germany—and, at least until the start of the war, even fascist Italy—wove plans for serious “pan-European” diplomacy. It was in keeping with this that its Eastern and Central European allies shaped their relations with the European great powers. And yet the link drawn between the Holocaust in Northern Transylvania and the “European idea”—or, rather, the references to “Europe” that occur throughout the work, especially as regards the political analysis of the post-1989 Hungarian-Romanian relationship—seem dubious. Perhaps it was at the request of the publisher that Case sought to render the Transylvania issue particularly timely in this respect in the published volume, but she would have been better to keep following through on the research she began in her exceptional PhD dissertation rather than undertake a less than wholly successful attempt to refocus as she does.

Notwithstanding every bit of criticism, and similarly to Brubaker’s book, Holly Case’s microhistorical analysis of Cluj serves to caution us that ethnic identity, often depicted as static, is indeed hardly spontaneous; instead it is the product of a state-supported or state-obstructed situative process of identification. Case’s book offers much not only to those Hungarian historians

9 András Joó, *Kállay Miklós külpolitikája. Magyarország és a háborús diplomácia, 1942–1944* [The Foreign Policy of Miklós Kállay: Hungary and Wartime Diplomacy, 1942–1944] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2008).

engaged in re-elaborating our understanding of the 1940–40 era—among them Balázs Ablonczy, Gábor Egry, Tamás Sárándi, and András Tóth-Bartos—but also to scholars of the region who seek to finally supersede the national narratives that followed the collapse of state socialism with another approach, that of transnational and comparative social history.

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