

Multicultural Cities of the Habsburg Empire 1880–1914. Imagined Communities and Conflictual Encounters. By Catherine Horel. Budapest–Vienna–New York: CEU Press, 2023. 556 pp.

Catherine Horel is unquestionably one of the most outstanding non-Hungarian historians engaged in the study of the history of both Hungary and the entire Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Horel has published extensively in the field, including a monograph on the history of Budapest, a biography of Miklós Horthy, and some further books and studies on various aspects of the history of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. As a scholar who lives and works in Paris, she is a prominent member of the international community of historians, and she holds important institutional positions, among others in the Comité International des Sciences Historiques and several other professional bodies.

Catherine Horel's recent book is a unique product of history writing in our time. The program of transnational history writing, which seeks to transcend both the intellectual and the topical frameworks of the national paradigm, is now on the agenda. Still, relatively few positive examples may be mentioned for it. In addition, even the precise notion of a transnational historical paradigm is somewhat obscure, not to mention suitable methodologies.

Concerning the empires of the modern era (first and foremost the Habsburg Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), one finds only a few comparative or transnational history narratives. This is regrettable, since these kinds of investigations would lessen the effects of the national and sometimes even the nationalist approaches to the study of the history of what was a substantially multinational, multicultural modern state and society. One explanation for the rarity of these kinds of studies is perhaps the challenges historians face as scholars who are accustomed to conceptualizations of their topical field within the frameworks of national historiographies. These conceptualizations have tended to predominate even when the national past in question constitutes an integral part of a once imperial state construction. Thus, anyone trying to embark from a transnational historical perspective in discussing the past of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy must make a concerted effort to avoid any commitment to a national and especially a nationalist historical viewpoint. Catherine Horel offers a good example of this kind of scholarship, as she manages to remain untouched by this epistemological bias.

The theme of the book is the town or the city. The precise way Horel approaches it may be labeled as transurban study, a strikingly new genre of

sorts in the field of urban history. This kind of study is not wholly unknown in the scholarly discourse, although these studies almost exclusively address the histories of the metropolises of the northern hemisphere. Small and middle-sized towns have been largely neglected by historians until recently. As far as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is concerned, only a few Austrian historians have devoted some attention to the problem in this way by adopting a comparative perspective (Wolfgang Maderthaner, Hannes Stekl, and Hans Heiss, for instance). These narratives, however, have focused especially or exclusively on the cultural settings and everyday life of these localities. At the same time, they have also been limited mostly to urban history in Cisleithania and have largely ignored urban history in Transleithania.

Catherine Horel's book is a pioneering work from at least three perspectives. First, she discusses the urban past of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy within a highly extensive comparative framework and with great attention to detail. She does this in part by choosing a somewhat shorter time period for her study (three and a half decades around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). This enables her to carry out a spatially extensive inquiry by focusing on many minute details of urban development on an empirical level. Her narrative resembles a microhistory narrative within a comparative framework. No similar undertaking has been accomplished in the field of urban history until recently, as the urban biography has been the dominant genre, an approach from which the town and the city are seen as entirely isolated spatial and social entities. Thus, urban historians rarely tend to place the town and the city in a comparative perspective with the explicit aim of seeking and finding more general patterns and explanations for the many particular developments going on within a single urban realm. Horel, however, breaks with this practice.

Secondly, historians who adopt a comparative perspective are usually content to rely entirely on secondary sources. This is in part a consequence of their inability to work in a multitude of relevant languages, which stands in fundamental contrast with the multicultural (multilingual) historical settings which are the subjects of study. Historians engaged in comparative research thus tend to use narratives available in one or a few world languages (English, German, or French), thereby failing to take into account the original narratives of national historiographies. Horel is an exception to this rule, as she reads and perhaps speaks almost every language used within the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Indeed, her knowledge of this diverse array of languages may well make her unique in her field. The fact that she can draw on the relevant

primary sources and the historical narratives presented in the various national languages unquestionably adds to the merits of her narrative.

With regards to the main findings of the monograph, Horel initially clarifies that the midsize cities under discussion had multiethnic populations, meaning that several languages were in use. Thus, these cities offer a representative sample of the multicultural empire alongside the metropolises (Vienna and Budapest in particular). It might be worth mentioning a remark made by Stanislaus Joyce, James Joyce's brother, who referred to Trieste, where his great novelist brother lived for several years at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a "multiethnic salad."

Catherine Horel clearly strove to choose "typical" urban settlements for her inquiry, i.e., cities in which the striking structural diversity had actually existed, going even beyond the numerous native languages that were in everyday use. In other words, she chose urban communities that were as heterogeneous from the perspective of religious confessions as the empire itself. Accordingly, she decided to compare the following midsize cities with one another: Arad, Brünn (today Brno, Czech Republic), Czernowitz (today Chernivitsi, Ukraine), Fiume (today Rijeka, Croatia), Lemberg (today Lviv, Ukraine), Nagyvárad (today Oradea, Romania), Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia), Sarajevo, Szabadka (today Subotica, Serbia), Temesvár (today Timișoara, Romania), Trieste, and Zagreb. These once Austrian-Hungarian cities are now found in seven different countries.

The main social and cultural characteristic of the midsize cities under discussion was that in spite of their diverse ethnic and national compositions, a single particular component of the local population was usually able to exercise decisive cultural and political authority. The possible variations in the ways in which power was exercised and contested, however, were wide. Sometimes, two ethnic communities could exercise authority on a more or less equal basis, for instance in Brno, where both the Moravian and the German populations wielded power. Most of the towns under discussion, however, followed a different pattern.

The main issue addressed in the book is how the existence of more than one ethnic group, living in the cities side by side, could shape and even determine urban life, both alongside and independently of class stratification. Or to put the question more precisely: in what forms and to what extent could these local societies actually integrate their inhabitants? With the aim of answering this question, Horel offers a detailed empirical examination of the problem of local school politics, autonomous confessional life, the intricate networks of civil

organizations (the associations), the many attempts to create and maintain an autonomous cultural infrastructure accessible to each of the ethnic communities separately, the many continuous efforts to control the urban public domain, political fights as indications of the actual multiethnic distribution of the population, and strivings to kindle a local sense of city patriotism and a local identity. As this list makes clear, Horel takes many issues into account to test the validity of her thesis statement, namely that despite all the centrifugal forces which heavily divided the urban populations everywhere in the monarchy at the time, the so called centripetal forces were also at work. These forces contributed to the integration (to some degree) of the diverse population into a local urban society that was unified at least on some level.

Horel ultimately concludes that, the diversity of these urban societies notwithstanding, mutual understanding and cooperation were still effective forces that historians cannot afford to ignore. The success of these forces, however, depended on the regional and local contexts, which differed significantly, especially in the Cisleithanian and Transleithanian contexts. As far as the former is concerned, the prevalence of a single colonization power (the German-speaking communities) proved not to be dominant in shaping or defining everyday life. Accordingly, beside the mass mobilization for a particular national project, other than the German one could also gain ground in these settings, mainly at the turn of the century. This factor created favorable positions for several non-German-speaking local forces in the local social and political hierarchy. Trieste offers a good example of this, as it was a flourishing city in which the Italian presence had the most influence, or one could mention Lemberg, where the Polish-speaking community prevailed, or Czernowitz, where Romanians and Ukrainians competed for control, or Sarajevo, where the Muslim and the Serbo-Croatian components of the town played key roles in managing the town life.

In Hungary, however, the officially forced national homogenisation policy did not leave any room for anything other than Hungarian (or Magyar) dominance over the other ethnic and linguistic groups, even in urban localities, where the ethnic Magyars actually represented only a minority (for instance in Pozsony and Temesvár). The deep difference between the two halves of the Monarchy in that regard go back to the special characteristics of the Hungarian national concept, the model for which was the French type nationalist conceptualization. This differed from the so-called *Volksstam* (“people’s tribe”) concept, which prevailed in the Cisleithanian part of the Monarchy. The latter provided some

real possibilities for the decentralization of local power and the representation of non-German national interests.

It would be a simplification, however, to explain these variations exclusively as consequences of the distinctively specific patterns which prevailed in the two halves of the Monarchy. Several local contexts also had an impact both on the intensity of the inherent tensions and the problems created by multilingualism and the multi-confessional makeup of the local population. Even the ways in which the conflicts were solved had some importance. Consequently, there were midsize cities in which the confrontations between or among the various ethnic and nationality components were sharper than the confrontations in other settlements. It is also true that not every ethnic segment was able to represent its own will on a public level with the same force. Jews, who were a presence in all the mid-size cities, were one of the social/ethnic/religious groups that were unable to exercise any serious political influence locally. Antisemitism, furthermore, was present everywhere. This followed in part from the fact that the assimilated Jews were usually thought to be supporters of stronger German influence, especially in the cities, where the rivalry between the non-German and German-speaking populations was acute (like in Brno). The Slovenes also played a similar secondary role behind Italians in Trieste, as did the Ukrainians in Lemberg facing the Polish rule.

The “culture of conflict” and the “conflict of cultures” fueled most of the community tensions in these urban settings. In addition to the role, they always had in setting the tone of the local public life, the integrative forces also fostered the creation of a kind of city identity or local patriotism. This local patriotism was tied to a prevailing sense of imperial loyalty, i.e., Habsburg patriotism. This element, however, was generally absent from the Transleithanian construct of identity. The establishment and maintenance of a national discourse always demanded active agency through rigorous local educational policies, and the ethnically-defined associations and cultural institutions created a physical infrastructure (theaters, museums, etc.). More than any other type of settlement, the city could thus become the place where openly political or easily politicized demands could appear in a visible form and could shape the public life of the citizenry. This explains why a comparative and transurban investigation is indispensable if we seek to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the mentality of the citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Catherine Horel’s amazingly informative and stimulating monograph opens a new chapter in the

urban history writing of Central Europe, as well as in the history of mentalities in this particular macroregion.

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