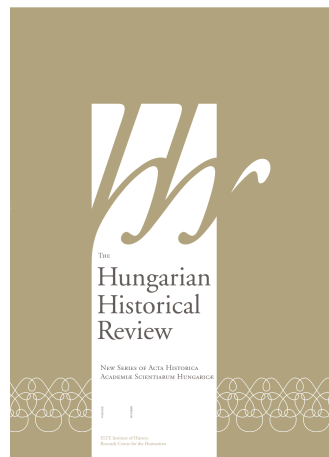


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Hungarian Religion, Romanian Blood: A Minority's Struggle for National Belonging, 1920–1945. By R. Chris Davies. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. Xxvii + 249 pp.

Using the example of the Csángós, a Catholic group in Moldova, eastern Romania, whose origins and nationality are subject to debate, R. Chris Davies contributes to the historical literature on the sociological phenomenon of ethnicity. Following the path set out by Pieter Judson, Tara Zahra, and Jim Bjork (among others), he analyzes the struggle of national activism to define a group's nationality and align it with either of the two rival nations. However, he cautiously mainly sidesteps the issue of how individuals really reacted to these attempts and concentrates less on the recently contested notion of national indifference. Instead, he deliberately focuses on the discourses and their sources, situated in the context of a radical change of nationalisms in interwar East and Central Europe. Thus, he presents a story triangulated, with Hungarian, Romanian nationalist, and Romanian Catholic intellectuals, whose efforts were instrumental to the fate of the group.

Davies' main claim is that the idea of the Romanian origins and subsequent Magyarization of the Csángós, which is today the cornerstone of Romanian arguments in the debate over their national belonging, was canonized not by anti-Hungarian Romanian intellectuals but by Catholic priests among the Csángós themselves (Iosif Petru Pal, Dumitru Martinaş etc.), who feared that if they could not shed the stigma of Hungarian-ness in Ion Antonescu's violently ethnocratic Romania, the fate of the Csángós would be deportation. In this effort, they found help and support from ultranationalist Romanian intellectuals who promoted a new, biologized definition of Romanian-ness (most importantly the serologist Petre Râmneanţu), and to make this new claim credible, they were ready to align themselves with extreme Romanian nationalism and even sometimes to join the Iron Guard. Thus, through their unholy alliance with materialist scientific practices (like blood group analyses) and mystical political Orthodoxy, which were both at odds with their Catholic faith, these clergymen, were helped by the turn of the tide in World War II. The resulting willingness of the Antonescu regime to present a less ugly face to the Allies changed the stance of the government, which earlier had deprived the Csángós of their citizenship. The regime fended off Hungarian efforts to achieve a population exchange, which would have meant moving the Csángós to enlarged Hungary in exchange for Romanian speakers from the territory of Hungary after the Second Vienna Awards.

To make this admittedly somewhat narrow story more relevant to the secondary literature on nationalism, Davies offers extensive contextualization, including intellectual and political developments in Hungary and Romania. After an overview of the most important concepts and theories, he provides an outline of the political and intellectual conflicts caused in interwar Romania by the efforts of a group of Orthodox intellectuals and politicians to define Romanian-ness as essentially equal to the Orthodox Christian Church. This effort certainly would have affected Catholics and, among them, the Csángós negatively. Nevertheless, as Davies argues, the late 1930s bore witness to a radical break with earlier conceptualizations of Romanian-ness, not least due to the introduction of what was thought to be cutting-edge science (eugenics, blood group analysis, etc.) to the toolkit of definitions concerning individual membership in a nation. Finally, the state endeavored to assign an unambiguous nationality to all of its citizens (and eventually depriving them of citizenship), as it wanted to purge the national body of anything considered (or defined as) alien and reinvigorate it from the source of the alleged authentic ethnic group.

In the meantime, many Hungarian intellectuals tried to cope with the losses of Trianon with a new concept of the nation which promised rebirth and reinvigoration on the basis of the peasantry, the allegedly purest layer of the national stock. Efforts to salvage the Csángós first aimed to prevent their linguistic assimilation and later to return them to the “homeland,” as was done with Székelys from Bukovina. This was part of a larger effort to redefine the people of Hungary in terms of ethnicity. Thus, the conflicting efforts came to a head regarding the Csángós during World War II and resulted in wider acceptance of their Romanian origins by Romanian academia.

Although sometimes the story seems to be a bit narrowly focused, it is highly readable, and it offers an excellent example of the ways in which national activists of all stripes competed for people whom they wanted to put on their account books. The broad contextualization helps to understand how all these efforts were situated within the contemporary milieu and trends, and the focus on Romanian Catholics and the Catholic Church instead of the Hungarian state or clergy actors is welcome, as it adds more than just nuance to the debate. But the characterization of the changes in nationalism at the end of the 1930s seems to gloss over significant affinities between trends in nationalism before and around that time, and it also obscures how policies and ideas were rooted in earlier contexts. Just to give one example, most of the Hungarian policies towards the Csángós were not based on a reconceptualization of the nation, but

rather had roots which lay in undertakings of the late nineteenth century, which were later abandoned as inopportune in the context of the friendly relations between Romania and the Triple Alliance. Thus, more traditional ideas of the nation could often be surprisingly easily reconciled with the novel and more radical ones, as they bore affinities and this reconciliation also helped foster political alliances.

Finally, Davies claims that the Csángós are an example of how small groups which seemingly divide can connect and unite states which have been brought into perpetual dialogue over their fates (p.164). While this constitutes a provocative claim which I also find appealing, I do not find much substantiation for it in the case of the Csángós. The Csángós were a minor, almost negligible concern for both states and especially for Hungary for most of the 20 years of the interwar period, and during World War II, there were larger issues at stake and forces in play in bilateral Hungarian-Romanian relations which helped the two states avoid armed conflict. These forces could have helped averting the clash only until Romania switched sides and war with Hungary followed, irrespective of the fate of the Csángós was. This does not diminish the value of this book, which will be of interest to anyone, laymen included, interested in nationalism, obscure people, and the history of Romania and Hungary in the twentieth century.

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