

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Robert Nemes.** *The Once and Future Budapest.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. xi + 247 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-337-1.

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## Civil Society and National Identification in Nineteenth-Century Budapest

It is an odd circumstance that, four decades since urban history began to attract significant attention among scholars in Western Europe and North America, there are still few western-language scholarly studies of modern cities in the former lands of the Habsburg Monarchy. There is considerable work in several languages on Vienna, and native scholars in the region have published general histories of many other cities in their own languages. Nonetheless, Robert Nemes's work is one of the few books on modern Budapest in English other than John Lukacs's *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture* (1988). The new book is most welcome, though, for a number of reasons beyond the dearth of other works.

Nemes traces the development in Buda, Pest, and Obuda (or "Buda-Pest" as he terms the conurbation before the formal merger in 1872-73) of civil society, national identification, and Hungarian national politics from the late eighteenth century to around 1890. The demographic, economic, and spatial growth of the city provides the context for a closer examination of public life and national culture in what was becoming the central metropolis for the modern Hungarian nation. Significant political events provide signposts for the long-term development of national culture, identity, and politics. Prominent nationalist leaders such as István Széchenyi, Lajos Kossuth, Miklós Wesselényi, and Sándor Petöfi appear in due course alongside various Habsburg palatines and high officials to provide faces and voices for those developments; but the book examines most directly the emerging civil society based in voluntary associations,

newspapers, political action, and the evolving political culture of Hungarian liberal nationalism.

Drawing on extensive and careful research, Nemes traces with analytical sophistication the many-sided cultural and political transformations that occurred in Budapest and Hungarian urban society during the nineteenth century. Beginning with the early efforts of small groups of prosperous burghers, officials, clergy, and aristocrats to create local voluntary associations, theaters, and other forms of public life, he examines the emergence of civil society and the struggles of early nationalists to advance the use of Hungarian and to articulate Hungarian national solidarity. We learn of the formation of a range of early voluntary organizations, political mobilization at various levels of urban society, changes in general modes of sociability and dress, the changing social roles of women, and evolving relations among the various religious and linguistic groups within the urban population. Nemes portrays with considerable sensitivity the ambiguities in creating the elements of modern public life and the beginnings of a civic culture between 1790 and 1830 in what was still a society of corporate ranks and orders where strong loyalties to the Habsburg dynasty and a traditional *Landespatriotismus* were still the rule for the great majority of the population. With the reinvigoration of the Hungarian Diet in the 1830s and the rise of Hungarian nationalist politics among various segments of the nobility and urban burghers, a modern civil society emerged. Nemes offers a particularly vivid depiction of life in the metropolis and the development of politics and civic life during the 1830s and early 1840s and an

equally telling analysis of the crosscurrents in public life and political culture during the periods of the 1848 revolution and the neo-absolutist 1850s. A more extensive treatment of the reemergence of liberal nationalist civic life and political action after 1859 and the impact on the city of Hungary's new constitutional government after 1867 would have been welcome, but Nemes defines the general trends deftly, illustrating them with well chosen soundings in specific local political and social developments.

There is much originality here in the basic approach, research, and findings. To my knowledge, few previous publications in English, other than Nemes's own articles, have examined the developments in the civil society and public life of Buda-Pest that are presented here. Even if other scholars have worked on individual aspects of urban society and politics in nineteenth-century Buda-Pest, they have not put the various phenomena together in the larger construct that Nemes presents. His work is clearly informed by recent work in cultural history and cultural studies, but he does not divert attention from the analysis of the historical developments that concern him to engage in any superfluous theorizing.

In order to cover such a long span of time in relatively brief compass, Nemes has selected particular moments in the development of urban public life, civic culture, the developed landscape, and politics to illustrate the larger trends that are his focus. I have already used the word "soundings" in this review, and that term describes well the approach used in much of this book, an approach shared with many other recent works in cultural history and cultural studies.[1] Nemes does not attempt to present a full urban history of nineteenth-century Budapest with a carefully balanced grand narrative; and the reader will not find here a full treatment of the development of the city's population, economy, constructed environment, or even its politics. Nemes's readings of the moments he has selected strike me as thoughtful, cogent, and generally well grounded in evidence. One might wish, though, for somewhat greater treatment of the major changes in the urban economy and the developed urban landscape of the city for each major chronological period and for a fuller, more balanced description

of developments in civic life and political action for all major strata of the urban population. That would have made for a significantly longer book, but one could argue that this would be merited given the meager English-language literature on nineteenth-century Buda-Pest. As is, the book offers little on the lower social strata before the 1840s. When artisans and wageworkers do appear, they are dropped into the narrative somewhat abruptly and get relatively little space.

Overall, though, the historical threads which Prof. Nemes has chosen to follow produce a well-woven book. The excellent writing, cogency of analysis and argumentation, and clarity of description make the study a pleasure to read. Particularly telling are the points the author makes about the constructed, voluntary character of national identification for the Buda-Pest populace and the function of everyday practices above and beyond the use of language itself in the development of national loyalties and public life, whether it be clothing, cuisine, or dances and other amusements. Nemes also illustrates well the reality that the cultural differences were often small between those who identified with the Hungarian national cause and those who did not.

#### Note

[1]. For examples in studies of East-Central Europe, see Alice Freifeld, *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848-1914* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Daniel Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848-1916* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005); and Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

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