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Eleonora Babejova. *Fin-de-Siecle Pressburg: Conflict and Cultural Coexistence in Bratislava, 1897-1914.* Boulder: East European Monographs, 2003. xiv + 467 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-515-7.

Reviewed by Robert Nemes (Department of History, Colgate University)
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Defending Pressburg against Nationalism

Bratislava today is a medium-sized Central European capital with a pronounced Slovak character. A century ago, it was small, provincial, and multicultural. This earlier era has found its historian in Eleanora Babejova, who has produced an insightful monograph on politics and nationhood in a city then known as Pressburg, Pozsony, and Presporok–but almost never as "Bratislava." Her goal is to demonstrate the inadequacy of ethnic categories as a tool of historical analysis and to uncover the "fluid cultural identities, multiple loyalties and a specific local identity that were characteristic of Bratislava's population in this period" (p. 2). Babejova digs deep into her topic, and one wishes that she had occasionally paused and cast her gaze on surrounding Central European cities. But the resulting study rests on a solid archival foundation, is carefully constructed, and opens windows onto a number of scholarly fields.

Babejova takes aim at scholarship on Pressburg that has been shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by nationalist considerations. Both Slovak and Hungarian historians, she suggests, have often ignored the resilience of local, non-national traditions and the complexity of social change and language use in an urban setting. Whereas earlier scholars saw "de-nationalization" and "assimilation" in Pressburg, Babejova describes a city of ethnically mixed marriages, linguistically diverse neighborhoods, and shared public spaces. At least among the educated classes, bi- and multilingualism were common. Of course, not all languages were equal–German and then Hungarian were the key to upward social mobility–but for most residents of the city, everyday languages did not determine political loyalties. Babejova argues that a Pressburger orientation–a non-national adherence to the city and its traditions–permeated local government, cultural institutions, and associational life. This is a persuasive claim, and Babejova would only strengthen her case by making direct comparisons with other cities in the region. Jeremy King's recent book on Budweis/Budejovice immediately comes to mind, and there are other studies that would give readers a clearer sense of the particular features of the Pressburgers' strong local loyalty.[1]

As part of this argument, Babejova repeatedly documents the limited gains made by different national movements before 1914. Neither the German nor the Slovak national cause had many partisans in Pressburg. The Hungarian national movement was more dynamic, and it drew strength from the Hungarian state, which actively pushed for the Magyarization of schools, offices, and cultural life, as well as from local activists who wanted to put their stamp on the theater, local press, and street names. This campaign netted some gains, at least on paper, and they also created tensions among the upper classes. But one of the themes of Babejova's book is the measured response of local leaders to new political forces, including Hungarian nationalism. Under pressure from Budapest, the town council and many associations dutifully began to maintain their minutes and official correspondence in Hungarian (in the place of German). In everyday transactions, however, they continued to use a mix of languages, thereby upholding local practices and dulling the edge of Hungarian nationalism.

Babejova finds a similar dynamic in her examination of Pressburg's position in the "national landscape"–that is, its symbolic position in the eyes of different national leaders. Hungarian nationalists, for example, wanted Pressburg to be a "bastion of Magyardom," a fortress guarding the national heartland not just from imaginary Pan-Germanic and Pan-Slavic foes, but from the economic and political might of nearby Vienna. In response, local leaders gladly supported nationalist projects (statues and a university) that promised to enhance the city's prestige and create jobs. When they did break with Hungarian nationalists–for example, over the construction of an electric railway linking Pressburg and Vienna–local leaders astutely couched their economic arguments in the language of state patriotism. Babejova also reminds

readers that the city occupied only a marginal place in the Slovak national imagination. Like their Hungarian counterparts, Slovak leaders looked with suspicion on Pressburg's mixed population and lukewarm response to national movements.

Local elites faced other challenges besides nationalism, and one of the strengths of Babejova's book is its careful analysis of the workers' movement in Pressburg. Babejova shows that nationalist appeals found little response among workers, who, if political, were drawn to socialism, and if not, preferred "alcohol, playing cards, and bowling" (p. 140). In time, religion and language fractured the workers' movement, leading to the emergence of a distinctly Slovak grouping of social democratic leaders. But such divisions at the top coexisted with daily interactions among workers of all backgrounds in factories and neighborhoods. In a separate chapter on "surveillance"–a concept borrowed from Michel Foucault–Babejova explores other impediments (censorship, policing, and informants) that stood in the way of working-class mobilization. Here, too, more references to other Central European cities would help readers understand what (if anything) was unique about the "competing grids of power and knowledge" operating in Pressburg (p. 198). In any event, Babejova again shows the pragmatism of local elites, who were much more tolerant of May Day celebrations than leaders in Budapest were, with the result that after 1900, workers gained an unprecedented visibility in the city's streets.

In the end, the reward in this book lies in Babejova's even-handed approach to all questions, mastery of sources in three languages, and engagement with a wide scholarly literature on nationalism. She provides nearly two dozen maps, illustrations, and tables, along with more than 130 pages of careful footnotes, which reward close reading. Ideally, the book would also have included an index. It could also have paid more attention to the role of women, to generational change and conflict, and to the actual content of selected cultural offerings, including individual plays, books, or concerts.

Religion in particular deserves more careful consideration (a point Babejova concedes on p. 19). Because Pressburg was more than 70 percent Catholic, it is worth asking whether Pressburger loyalty was coterminous with Catholicism. Put differently: the local elite may have been multilingual, but was it also multiconfessional? The answer to this question would tell us much about the often tense relationship between Catholics and Protestants. It would also help us understand more about the town's sizeable Jewish population, which receives short shrift in this study. This is somewhat surprising, given that Pressburg was an early center of Orthodox Jewry and even called the "Hungarian Jerusalem." Conversely, it is worth stressing that Pressburg witnessed nearly a week of antisemitic rioting in 1882 (and that the surrounding county returned three MPs for the antisemitic Party in 1884). Babejova buries this information in a long footnote (p. 416), which is unfortunate, since it raises questions about her repeated assertion that urban elites successfully used a mixture of coercion and compromise to forestall violence.

Finally, the chronology of the book deserves some comment. According to its title, the book offers a study of conflict and cultural coexistence from 1897 to 1914. Because Babejova repeatedly uses 1867 (a much more meaningful date in Hungarian history) as a starting point for her analysis, one almost suspects that the "1897" is a typo; at the very least, the title is much too modest, though the year "1914" makes sense as an endpoint for this study. Non-specialists would nonetheless have benefited from a sketch, even if roughly drawn, of the remarkable changes that came to Pressburg in the years immediately following 1914: the world war, Czech occupation, the peace treaty, and border changes. Most remarkably, the city was suddenly and unexpectedly renamed "Bratislava," which, as Peter Bugge has recently shown, served the needs of the city's new Czechoslovak rulers but had little resonance in Pressburg itself.[2] Only in the mid-1920s would equilibrium be restored, with new external pressures and internal tensions. But this is getting ahead of the story, and for the period 1867 to 1914, Babejova has provided a firm foundation for future research, as well as a well-documented case study for scholars and students interested in Central European nationalism and urban history.

Notes

[1]. Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[2]. Peter Bugge, "The Making of a Slovak City: The Czechoslovak Renaming of Pressburg/Pozsony/Presporok, 1918-19," *Austrian History Yearbook* 35 (2004): pp. 205-27; also see Elena Mannova, "Die Entstehung einer neuen Hauptstadt und der Wandel der Vereinsoeffentlichkeit: Pressburg 1900-1939," in *Stadt und Oeffentlichkeit in Ostmitteleuropa 1900-1939*, eds. Andreas R. Hofmann and Anna V. Wendland (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), pp. 185-192; and Lubomir Liptak, "Bratislava as the Capital of Slovakia," in *Change of Changes: Society and Politics in Slovakia in the 20th Century*, trans. Martin C. Styan and Sharon Miklosova (Bratislava: Academic Electronic Press, 2002), pp. 95-116.

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