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Nancy M. Wingfield. *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. xviii + 353 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02582-0.

Reviewed by Bruce Bergland

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## Performing Nationalism in the Bohemian Lands

As Brian Porter-Szucs observes in a recent essay, the field of nationalism studies has entered its twilight. “While articles and books on a wide variety of nationalisms continue to appear,” he writes, “the intellectual excitement and dynamism that marked this subfield throughout the 1990s appears to be gradually fading.” This waning of the study of nationalism does not diminish the importance of the nation in modern history. “Nonetheless,” he acknowledges, “the field of ‘nationalism studies’ has lost a bit of its glamour, thanks primarily to its own success as an intellectual endeavor.”[1]

Admittedly, my reading of the book under review was colored by this prognosis of nationalism studies fatigue. Did this study, I asked while reading, offer a refreshing turn in the field, pointing to new questions that our students might pursue in years ahead? Or did it apply an accepted interpretative approach to cast new light on familiar chapters of East Central European nationalism, bringing new details into focus? If the field of nationalism studies is indeed in its late maturity, then such questions are appropriate for new entries to the field.

Certainly, Nancy M. Wingfield has contributed to the success of the intellectual endeavor of nationalism studies over the last decade. She served as editor of the journal *Nationalities Studies*, and the essay collections she edited have been notable additions to the literature on East Central Europe. Her book, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints*, builds on this earlier work, offering a broad-

ranging study of Czech and German nationalism from the late nineteenth century to the immediate post-World War II years. As in her volume of essays on commemorations in the late- and post-Habsburg lands, Wingfield’s attention here is to the cultural forms of national differentiation, from everyday items like clothing and beer to public monuments and mass demonstrations, and the ways these were used to define group identity, legitimate an invented tradition, or mark claimed space.[2]

Wingfield explains her aim in the book’s introduction. She writes, “I analyze the creation, appropriation, adaptation, and even the reinvention of cultural icons and national myths and the ways these were employed in public space to provide a different perspective in the ongoing debates of the last decade over the construction of national identities in the Bohemian Lands.” She adds, “I approach the creation of national identity by analyzing conflicting constructions of icons, myths, and memories whose meaning changed over time and resonated in confrontations, often reflecting cultural concerns, such as celebrations, film, holidays, and monuments” (pp. 6-7).

At times, as the above sentences suggest, the ambitious approach to so many cultural forms can be diffuse. Still, in making an approach from cultural history, the book does offer new insights into the hardening of national communities in the Bohemian Lands. The book also lifts the curtain on new scenes; Brünn/Brno,

Eger/Cheb, Aussig/Usti nad Labem, and other sites in Bohemia and Moravia feature prominently. Based impressively on archives and periodicals in these varied locations, as well as records of imperial and republican ministries, the book places the more familiar histories of Prague and Budweis/Budejovice into proper context, presenting parallel and sometimes sequential episodes of nationalist antagonism across the region.

Another strength of the book is its analysis of the nationalization of both Czechs and Germans. Throughout the volume, from the early chapter on demonstrations over the 1897 Badeni Language Ordinances to her discussion of German responses to the nascent political culture of the First Republic, Wingfield devotes welcome attention to the German part in the drama, showing how nationalists on each side played off the other. A principal argument of the book is that the notion of a cohesive community of Germans under the moniker *Sudetendeutschen* was an invention of the late nineteenth century that gained adherents only in response to the perceived affronts of the ruling Czechs in the interwar republic. And really, it is difficult to begrudge the Germans' sense of insult. Already in the nineteenth century, Czech nationalism was a brutish sport. The received story of modern Czech nation building as the noble effort of well-meaning intellectuals is countered here by scenes of smashed windows and smashed faces. Belligerent, laced with anti-semitism, and primed for confrontation with the Germans, the thuggish side of Czech nationalism is laid bare in the book.

But by no means are the Germans excused. For their part, German nationalists were just as eager as Czechs to pick a fight. As Wingfield shows, tempers between the two groups often flared around monuments and other cultural landmarks, including the proposed Czech university in Brünn, the German Casino on Na Prikope in Prague, a local Deutsches Haus or Besedni dum, and baroque statues of Catholic saints. The frequently bloody, and sometimes deadly, brawls over these sites catalyzed the hardening divisions between Czech and German nationalists—and rehearsed a motif that would have its final sounding in 1945.

As with nearly all studies of nationalism in the Czech Lands, the overarching question of Wingfield's study is: why the events of 1945 or, more specifically, why the *odsun*? In answering this question about what drove Czechs to turn so viciously and decisively against Germans in their communities, Wingfield insists persuasively that culture matters. Statues of Joseph II and Jan

Hus raised in villages and towns, choreographed festivities with young girls in folk dress and marching army veterans, flags of black and gold or white and red, the Sunday parades of singing university students—all of these nourished feelings of difference and malice between the solidifying national groups of the Bohemian Lands, and the “depth of emotion,” in Wingfield's words, from which grew the violence of occupation and expulsion (p. 16). As she explains at the book's close, the heated fights between Czechs and Germans during the monarchy's final decades and the years of the First Republic “did not alone decide the national contest, but they certainly helped create the context for its result,” which came with the defeat of Nazi Germany and the expulsion of Czechoslovakia's Germans. “The return of the German 'colonists' to their German 'homeland' beginning in 1945,” she concludes, “gave concrete expression to the aggressive language of difference, even separation, that both communities had long employed” (p. 295).

The connection between cultural trappings and violent nationalism is shown clearly in Wingfield's chapter on the rioting that broke out in September 1930 over German-language films showing in Prague theaters. Over several nights gangs of Czechs trooped from one movie house to another in the city center, tearing down film posters and smashing windows of theaters and cafés. The demonstrations stirred political storms on domestic and international fronts. More significant, as Wingfield discusses, is what the demonstrations revealed about Czech nationalism of the 1930s.

At the time, not only right-wing nationalists but also police and government officials displayed defensiveness to any “insult” to the Czech nation. This sensitivity, along with a sense of unshared claim to Prague, led to the belief among some Czechs that a Weimar-produced film was part of a monolithic German threat, which included local Germans as well as German-speaking Jews. The rioters targeted conspicuous signs of this threat to “Slavic Prague,” whether theaters showing the German-language films, cafes frequented by Germans, or Jewish-owned property. The vandalism did earn the condemnation of many Czechs, especially since the instigators were aligned with the Czech Fascists. But there were mainstream politicians (particularly at the municipal level) and journalists who endorsed the demonstrations. The fact that a mob taking vengeance against the insults of German romantic comedies was able to turn public opinion thus portended the charged atmosphere of the late 1930s and postwar years.

But the episode of the film riots also raises questions about Czech nationalism—and the ways we study and write the history of nationalism. The 1930 demonstrations against the German talkies were, it appears, limited affairs. Yes, these mobs made a lot of noise, broke a lot of windows, and gained the attention of politicians in Prague and abroad. But the number of people who launched the protests, some one or two hundred, was small, particularly compared to the estimated crowds that took part in earlier events described in the book. These crowds were also limited in that they were largely comprised of men in their late teens and early twenties. Wingfield does note the presence of women in the 1930 protests, as in earlier demonstrations, but arrest records indicate that these were young men smashing windows and clashing with police. As one German newspaper writer remarked, the demonstrators amounted to “a few hundred young people, who otherwise spend their time at soccer grounds”: in other words, gangs of hooligans (p. 222). The use of gender-neutral terms, such as “demonstrators,” “crowds,” or simply “Czechs” and “Germans,” masks the leading role of these boys and young men.

If we look at episodes like the 1930 riots as events of nationalism, or performances of nationness, we might ask how our perspective changes when we recognize that they were oftentimes performed, principally, by unruly young men. For people in the outlying neighborhoods, the rumbles of a few hundred thugs in the center of Prague might have been regarded as a distant event—or even a non-event. We can ask then, how did the nationalized landscapes of the center, molded by mob scenes like these as well as orchestrated demonstrations, expand to the margins? Furthermore, given that there were plenty of Czechs who initially liked the targeted talkies, we might ask why an event of nationalism like the anti-film riots succeeded as a catalytic moment, turning the opinions of onlookers, while other events presumably fizzled. As Wingfield acknowledges at the start of the book, the nationalization of the Bohemian Lands and the people who inhabited them was complicated and uneven. We can gain a fuller sense of this process by asking how these performances, acted out by disaffected young men on central streets and squares, came to nourish nationalist emotions among other segments of the population, in otherwise quiet neighborhoods.

As we stir in new questions to maintain the freshness of nationalism studies, there are, in my reading, two approaches offered in the book that can be worthwhile additions to the field. As Wingfield states at the start, an aim of her study is to broaden our understanding of

the cultural history of national distinction. Particularly striking to me in this regard is the book’s attention to material culture. Although she does not indicate an explicit focus on material culture, against the other cultural forms she investigates, Wingfield’s study suggests the insights into the history of nationalism that can be gained from this line of study. As scholars of material culture attest, household goods, buildings, artworks, clothing, and other artifacts have great significance in the formation of communities.

Material objects impart specific messages, something that is clear in Wingfield’s treatment of the artifacts of Czech and German nationalism. But beyond their communicative functions, material objects are also produced and used, requiring the historian to attend to their social and economic contexts. For example, Wingfield’s accounts of the production of Joseph II monuments and the attempts of German communities to boycott Czech beer reveal the mix of factors involved in performances of nationness—and how contrived these performances were. How many Czech workers and investors, I wondered, benefited from the sale of Joseph II statues to German communities? And how many Germans hesitated to give up their pilsner for the nationalist cause? A few years ago, a brief discussion on this listserv raised the prospects of research into the material culture of East Central Europe.[3] A study of the material culture of the various nationalisms of the region might be a good place to start.

A second noteworthy approach of the book is its focus on spatial issues. In her examination of various material artifacts, Wingfield addresses how they were used to mark nationalized places. This discussion of space as an arena of nationalist activity and conflict is important and necessary. Geographers have charged that the key writings on nationalism have overlooked the territorial motives of national movements and the relationship between people and place in the construction of national identities—themes that historians are now investigating.[4] In her study of Czech and German nationalists, Wingfield argues that both groups sought to lay claim to the public space through the shaping of a nationalized landscape. By erecting statues, hanging flags, staging festivals and commemorations, and building cultural houses, Czech and German groups marked a square or city center as their own, nationalized place. Nationalists on both sides envisioned these local sites, as well as entire cities and even regions, as their exclusive possession.

For example, in the competing nationalist rallies of

1905 in Brünn/Brno, sparked by demands for a Czech-language university in the city, Czech and German speakers rallied their respective sides with talk of gaining or losing the city. The statements that Brünn was in danger of falling to the Czechs' Trojan horse tactics, or that Brno was a bilingual city soon to become a monolingual one, indicated the schemes that each side had for the city. Meanwhile, mobs put this rhetoric to action, smashing storefronts and windows of cultural organizations in an effort to negate the other group's hold on the city center. Whether expressed in vandalism or in speeches on the square, the bids for sole possession of Brünn or Brno, as for other towns and cities, presaged the marking of larger regions and eventually all of the Bohemian Lands as belonging to one group alone. Just as Czech and German nationalists increasingly adopted a "language of difference," so did they come to see the places that both inhabited as distinct nationalized territories, adding further to the cultural context that would flash into wartime and postwar violence.

The book concludes with a discussion of the nationalized landscape of postwar Czechoslovakia, showing this final resolution to the Czech-German conflict. Wingfield's approach to the cultural side of Czechs and Germans' decades-long struggle complements the existing studies of political and social friction between these groups, demonstrating that carvings in stone and colored strips of cloth oftentimes sparked the violent clashes of hundreds or even thousands. With its geographic reach, blending of cultural and political history, accomplished use of a wide range of sources, and proficiency with the recent literature on nationalism in the region, the volume offers a summative statement on nation building in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bohemia. And the book's attention to material culture and especially to the spatial motives of nationalists suggests directions that students of nationalism might pursue in the future.

But will approaches like these provide a sufficient jolt to nationalism studies? Or are more ambitious turns required, such as getting past the violent endgames of the war years as the source of our questions, or viewing nationalist events as one subset of hooliganism in history? I don't know. It appears, though, that as current studies, such as Wingfield's, emphasize the messiness in processes of nationalization, the patchwork makeup of national identities, and the contingency of nationness, then we cannot help but de-center the nation from our research. Alas, however, nationalism will be a habit hard to break.

#### Notes

[1]. This article, initially published in Polish, is available in English at Brian Porter-Szucs, "Beyond the Study of Nationalism," [http://www-personal.umich.edu/~baporter/beyond\\_nationalism.pdf](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~baporter/beyond_nationalism.pdf). For the Polish version, see Brian Porter-Szucs, "Podzwonne dla badan nad nacjonalizmem," in *Naród-tozsamosc-kultura: Miedzy koniecznosciami a wyborem*, ed. Wojciech Burszta, Krzysztof Jaskułowski, and Joanna Nowak (Warszawa: Sławistyczny Ośrodek Wydawniczy, 2005), 79-89.

[2]. Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur, eds., *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001).

[3]. The discussion thread on material culture was opened with the post of T. Mills Kelly on October 10, 2001 at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?~trx=vx&list=habsburg&month=0110&week=b&msg=dxN68f4DjFZF%2bFYUwXrGTg&user=&pw=>.

[4]. For geographers' critiques of the literature of nationalism, see David H. Kaplan and Guntram H. Herb, introduction to *Nested Identities: Nationalism, Territory, and Scale*, ed. David H. Kaplan and Guntram H. Herb (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

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