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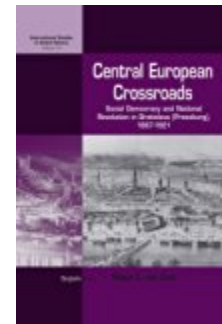


Pieter C. van Duin. *Central European Crossroads: Social Democracy and National Revolution in Bratislava (Pressburg), 1867-1921*. International Studies in Social History Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. xii + 466 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-395-4.

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Historiographical Crossroads, or Studying the Making of a Twentieth-Century East Central European City

Bratislava, today the capital of the Slovak Republic, is one of those mid-size East Central European cities to have undergone a dramatic transformation over the past century. Collapse of empires, reconfiguration of political borders and national economies, wars, population transfers, and ambitious programs in social engineering (and their fall) have all played a role. Anyone who has spent time in the region might think of similar cities, such as Kaliningrad (Königsberg), Vilnius, Wrocław (Breslau), České Budějovice, or Lviv (Lemberg), that underwent shifts in both ethnopolitical arrangements and in how those cities were seen by different factions to fit within the contentious and shifting national projects of the twentieth century.

Pieter C. van Duin's account of the making of multiethnic Habsburg Pressburg/Pozsony/ Prešporok into Czechoslovak Bratislava is not so much one of transforming ethnonational consciousness or of ethnic cleansing. Rather, it is more a story of how a new state (the First Czechoslovak Republic) struggled to integrate a city into its administrative fabric, and how ethnopolitical factions within that city responded to this new geopolitical arrangement, regime of citizenship, and moment of economic transformation. Van Duin's book aims, among other things, to situate a closer reading of events from 1918 to 1921 within a longer view of ethnically distributed political and economic enfranchisement in Upper Hungary after the Ausgleich of 1867, an order that was undergoing tremendous upheaval in an era of na-

tional "self-determination" and increased class struggles.

The author opens up the book with a focus on questions of "labor and nationalism." After a brief critical review of a select set of historical work on nationalism in the region (more on it below), van Duin takes the reader first through a description of the social structure in Upper Hungary, as the present-day territory of Slovakia was known in the four decades between the Ausgleich (the famous Austro-Hungarian power-sharing compromise) of 1867 and the end of World War I. He describes how Magyar Social Democrats struggled for influence within a political system that limited the franchise both politically and economically. He then compares the situation in Pressburg, as present-day Bratislava was then known in German. We learn how the historically much greater percentage of ethnic Germans (falling over the period of the book from a high of 75 percent to about 40 percent of the population, according to the era's politicized censuses) formed the city's economic and cultural elite, in contrast to the administratively dominant Magyars, or minority working-class Slovaks (10-15 percent of the city's population, according to those censuses). This laying out of background is extensive but not redundant, serving as the first of three parts of the book.

The second part of the book, or its core of more intensive description and analysis, concerns the political, economic, and ethnonational situation in Pressburg from the fall of the Habsburg Empire at the end of World War

I into the first three years of the new Czechoslovak state. The first months—until spring of 1919—are described in rich detail. Van Duin develops very nicely a sense of that period’s chaos. A resounding question that the city’s previous ruling elite seems to have demanded, over and over, is why a Czechoslovak state founded on principles of Wilsonian democratic self-determination was not treating the residents of Pressburg with the same democratic spirit. From demands for a plebiscite on the geopolitical future of the city (whether it should, in fact, belong to the new Czechoslovak state) to resentment over Pragocentric economic policies, to the apparent paranoia and skittishness of Czechoslovak authorities in their handling of academic freedom at the city’s university, we read over and over again about the complaints, dissatisfactions, and occasional outbursts of a German and Magyar citizenry.

At the same time, van Duin unpacks a deeper complexity to the politics of ethnonational hierarchies. His attention to different political parties—particularly the Social Democrats—shows us that none of Pressburg/Bratislava’s ethnicities was united regarding how to relate to the new Czechoslovak state. We read a nice description of the politics of denunciation, intrigue, and turncoatism, and the role of a transitioning media in it, all of which is valuable context for any scholar of the city’s political culture during the later fascist, state socialist, or post-socialist periods. Being more familiar myself with these later periods of the past century, I could not help but wonder about how these resentments, factions, and anxieties of late 1918 to 1921 would replay themselves in later political crises of 1939, 1945, 1948, 1968, and 1989. Social Democrats struggled to overcome the diverse worldviews and conceits of their ethnonationally conscious memberships. Magyar Social Democrats, for instance, resented the dismemberment of prewar territorial Hungary, where their German counterparts in the city seemed both puzzled at why ethnicity mattered and unsure of how best to fit pragmatically within the moment’s new politics of ethnicity. I found this account extremely enlightening on the challenges of nation-building in East Central Europe in that immediate postwar period (with extensions to more recent projects in other corners of the world). But more to the point of the book, for anyone interested in the early twentieth-century history of Social Democratic movements, van Duin’s work chronicles well the challenges posed by nation-based political ideologies.

While this book’s title, and its protagonists, both signal an interest in social democracy and Social Democrats, I was left finding it distracted by the dual task of sifting

through predominantly Slovak scholarship on the period and aiming to set straight a historical record. In part this might be an outcome of the author’s extensive use of existing scholarship, rather than sole reliance on his other sources (mostly newspapers as well as Slovak and Austrian archives). In utilizing that scholarship, van Duin makes a commendable effort to evaluate different interpretations, rather than simply synthesize their claims uncritically. However, while the book’s title emphasizes social democracy and national revolution, and the introduction claims the book will contribute to the study of these fields, there is no review of existing work on social democracy or labor history in the region. In fact, “social democracy” seems quickly equivocated with “labor history,” even though the book ends up making clear that many of the Magyar or German Social Democrats were part of the city’s (and empire’s) old elite, and not that of a grassroots movement. The picture of “politics” that we get repeatedly throughout the book is one of elite public spheres reacting to new political economic conditions of their existence.

Instead of a discussion of existing work on social democracy or labor history, the introduction contains a brief aforementioned review of a limited set of work on nationalism. After considering the work of Miroslav Hroch, Anthony D. Smith, Ernest Gellner, and Benedict Anderson, the author sides with the work of early twentieth-century theoretician Otto Bauer. The field of nationalism studies, of course, exploded beginning in the early 1990s following these first four authors’ work. More recent developments in the historiography of nationalism in East Central Europe are curiously omitted. One particularly obviously relevant work (for those who know it) is Jeremy King’s on the ethnopolitics of České Budějovice, situated in the Czech half of the former Czechoslovakia. Aside from King, a larger recent name in the field of nationalism studies more broadly (and the coauthor of a recent study reviewed in HABSBERG on a multiethnic Central European city, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* [2008]) is Rogers Brubaker (*Ethnicity without Groups* [2004]). In fact, the study of ethnonational transformations in East Central European cities seems to be its own growing field, one that would have been nice for van Duin to have tied into.[1] One underdeveloped opportunity this kind of work offers for scholars of East Central Europe (and into which the material on the media and civic organization from Crossroads could fit) is to add their perspective to already existing scholarship on publics and public spheres, focused until now predominantly on West Cen-

tral Europe: German, French, and English language milieu.[2]

The book left me reflecting on the challenges of the kind of synthetic project that van Duin attempted. A study of social democracy, national revolution, and ethno-politics in a Central European city faces several: sorting out existing local scholarship (such as how to evaluate a February 1919 massacre or the roles and stances of various political figures), attending to the broader regional sociohistorical context, and developing analytical concepts for use beyond the context of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Van Duin seems to have gotten pulled between the first two tasks and the third; the first two developed quite well here, but the third underdeveloped and perhaps distracted by the gatekeeping concept of nationalism and national identity for scholarship on the region. Along the way, developments in more recent scholarship—such as on cities—have been overlooked. Perhaps the book would have benefited from more formal collaboration with other authors (such as Brubaker’s recent study of Cluj/Kolozsvár). Despite van Duin’s claim to have consulted sources in six languages, including more apparently scarce Hungarian ones, I was left feeling that his project favored Slovak and German sources and subsequent views over Hungarian: little, if anything, is cited from a Hungarian language source. Given the city’s Magyar and Hungarian past, I wondered what other sources could have been consulted, perhaps by a collaborating colleague, to have been more equitable with the multiethnic past.

The publisher, Berghahn Books, generously allowed this study to reach four hundred pages, a length that felt long for use in courses, but that reflected breadth and depth, rather than redundancy or poor editing. Stylistically, the book is well written. I was surprised, however,

that the book contains no maps whatsoever, especially given the author’s framing of it in places as a study of Pressburg/Bratislava in “time and space.” For readers less informed about the Habsburg Empire, at least two basic geopolitical maps of the empire and the First Czechoslovak Republic would have been nice. In addition, one of Bratislava itself would have been helpful, especially on pages 88–89 where the author describes the ethnic distribution of the population across different parts of the city.

In sum, despite missing opportunities for greater theoretical relevance, this book will be of interest and use to scholars of and for upper-level courses on the history of cities, twentieth-century Europe, and ethnonational dimensions of European labor politics.

Notes

[1]. See, e.g., Markian Prokopovych, *Habsburg Lemberg: Architecture, Public Space, and Politics in the Galician Capital, 1772–1914* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008); Till van Rahden, *Jews and Other Germans: Civil Society, Religious Diversity, and Urban Politics in Breslau, 1860–1925*, 1st ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); and David K. Bridges, “In Moscow’s image? Creating Soviet State and Society in Kaliningrad Province, 1945–1970” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2008).

[2]. Geoff Eley, *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

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