

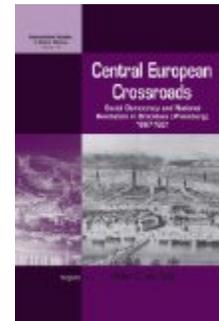


Pieter C. van Duin. *Central European Crossroads: Social Democracy and National Revolution in Bratislava (Pressburg), 1867-1921*. International Studies in Social History Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. xii + 466 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-395-4.

Reviewed by Rebekah Klein-Pejšová (Purdue University)

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## The National Boundaries of Internationalist Politics in Bratislava

In *Central European Crossroads*, Peter C. van Duin examines the development of the Social Democratic movement in the context of postimperial national state building through the lens of Bratislava, the capital of today's Slovakia. Focus on Bratislava is well suited for demonstrating van Duin's thesis that national tensions and ethnic dynamics profoundly shaped the history of social democracy in Central Europe, especially regarding the fragmentation of the movement into national blocs in interwar Czechoslovakia.

The city itself, located on both banks of the Danube less than sixty kilometers from Vienna and just over twice as far from Budapest, was a key battleground in the struggle for the incorporation of the newly defined territory of Slovakia, formerly the northern counties of the prewar Kingdom of Hungary, into the new Czechoslovak state. For this reason, it would have been worthwhile for the author to analyze connections and disconnections between Bratislava and the territory of Slovakia as a whole throughout the text. While van Duin presents the reader with the specificity of Bratislava, and its polyglot small-scale cosmopolitan atmosphere at the intersection of Central European developments, his quixotic intention is to underscore the separate internationalist path the city might have taken had it not been forced into its national role.

The challenging process of reorienting the territory and its nationally, ethnically, and confessionally diverse

population as a whole began in the period of political upheaval in Central Europe immediately following the First World War from fall 1918 through spring 1919. In Czech and Slovak historiography this era is known as the *Prevrat*, or change of regimes. Detailed analysis of the *Prevrat* based on meticulous study of extensive German, Czech, and Slovak, but unfortunately not Hungarian-language archival and periodical sources forms the bulk of this overly long and often tedious study of this fascinating time and place.

Transforming the multiethnic city into the Slovak capital formed a significant part of the state-building project overall, and was logistically as well as symbolically important for actualizing Czechoslovak national rule. The traditional dominance of the German-speaking population in the city accounts for why van Duin refers to it by its German name Pressburg until the chronology of the text reaches March 14, 1919, when it was officially named Bratislava. He does remind us, however, that the population of Bratislava had become tri-national by 1900 where Hungarians (Magyars), who called—and still do call—the city Pozsony, were politically dominant, while German speakers were economically so, and Slovaks constituted a sizable percentage (van Duin does not provide the number) of the working class. All were “involved in a diffuse struggle over ethnic and social positions in the city, and over the question of whose culture was to dominate it now and in the future” (p. 10). Van Duin acknowledges that most of the considerable Jewish population of

the city, more than 10 percent of the 78,223 inhabitants according to the 1910 Hungarian census, belonged to the German-speaking demographic, as was usually the case in western Slovakia (p. 85). Despite their numbers and certainly the involvement of many Jews in the local Social Democratic movement, van Duin leaves the Jewish population out of an otherwise intricate narrative that emphasizes the strength of the German position.

In van Duin's book, the national story overwhelms the Socialist one. This is perhaps the most expectable outcome of his goal of finding the intersection of the study of nation and ethnicity with the field of labor history through study of internationalist solidarity in the nationally radicalized, mutually hostile interwar Central European state system. He is writing primarily for a Western European audience for whom he wishes to "bring together in one analysis issues like ethnic stratification, national oppression, ethnic aspects of labor organization, and the rise of national antagonism within the social democratic movement" because, he asserts, West European historians hail from societies where ethnic nationalism does not usually play a decisive historical role in labor history, in stark contrast to historians from Central and Eastern Europe (p. 4). By widening the net geographically, however, his work does offer a more balanced take on the labor history of a region distorted by Cold War era Communist historiography. In addition, his

work adds to the minimal number of English-language studies focused on the history of Slovakia at all, and especially those that address the complexity of this period of national transformation.

The strength of the work lies in its attention to the question of viability of international political solidarity from the Dualist period in Austria-Hungary, through the post-World War One upheavals and their results from an intentionally broader regional perspective. The best example of this is his discussion of the deeply distrustful response of the Czechoslovak government and Bratislava's working-class movement to the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic on March 23, 1919, and its influence on the split of the local Social Democratic movement with revolutionary Hungary, as well as on the consolidation of the fault lines of the nationally fragmented movement. Unfortunately, van Duin's work nevertheless suffers from a lack of clarity and direction that could have been avoided through substantial editing for length, level of necessary detail, and instances of awkward phrasing. The book is recommended for specialists who will benefit from the intensive discussion of the years 1918 through 1919 and van Duin's interpretations of the Communist era historiography on the subject. This study will be valuable as a source for upper level research and literature review.

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