

**Bálint Varga.** *The Monumental Nation: Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hungary.* Austrian and Habsburg Studies Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2016. 300 pp. \$130.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78533-313-2.

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The “millennial” celebrations that took place in Hungary in 1896 were a high point of liberal rule in the eastern half of the Habsburg monarchy. Inspired by the supposed one-thousand-year anniversary of the arrival of the seven Magyar tribes into the Carpathian basin, the celebrations showcased Hungary’s reemergence in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a modern and self-confident kingdom, and simultaneously affirmed the supremacy of the Magyars over half of the population, which belonged to the various minorities. While the ongoing transformation of the Hungarian capital, Budapest, into a grand European metropolis and the popular exhibition that was held in the city park were the focus of these celebrations, festivities and building projects took place across the country.

In the past decade, a number of historians, including Samuel Albert, Dorothy Barendscott, and András Gerő, have provided useful accounts in English of these celebrations, but their focus has tended to be on events in Budapest.[1] In contrast, this book provides a fascinating study of how the “millennial” year was celebrated at the local level. The author achieves this by examining the erection of seven millennial monuments, five of which were located on the multiethnic periphery of the country where the government’s efforts to assimilate the local population were concentrated and contentious. Two of these monuments were constructed in present-day Slovakia, at Devín just to the west of Bratislava and on a hill overlooking Nitra. A third monument was erected in the Mukachevo castle in present-day Ukraine; a fourth was erected on a hill overlooking Braşov in present-day Romania; and a fifth monument, which consisted of a tower topped off by the legendary *turul* bird, a Magyar national symbol, overlooked Zemun in present-day Serbia. The other two monuments were located next to the Benedictine monastery of Pannonhalma, west of Budapest, and at Ópusztaszer, the reputed place where the Magyar tribes first gathered after they concluded their conquest, which is situated in the far south of present-day Hungary.

The book begins with a brief but effective overview of Hungary’s efforts to integrate its minorities in the nineteenth century and then proceeds to explain how the idea of erecting these monuments came to fruition through the efforts of the influential historian and fraudster Zsigmond Thaly. The core of this book consists, however, of a series of studies of local conditions at the end of the nineteenth century in each of the seven localities in which a millennial monument was erected. This is followed by an account of the

festivities that took place in four of the seven localities when the monuments were formally unveiled and the fate of all of these monuments after 1896.

Although the local history of Bratislava in this period has been covered by a number of other studies, such as the valuable monographs by Eleonóra Babejová (*Fin-de-siècle Pressburg: Conflict and Cultural Coexistence in Bratislava, 1897-1914* [2003]) and Pieter C. van Duin (*Central European Crossroads: Social Democracy and National Revolution in Bratislava (Pressburg), 1867-1921* [2009]), all of the other locations have been relatively neglected, particularly in English-language scholarship. The impressive scope of the research is reinforced by the author's ability to use not only Hungarian but also German, Slovak, Romanian, and Serbo-Croatian sources as well as a familiarity with the relevant English-language publications. This is, in short, "transnational" history writing at its best.

Through the use of these seven case studies, this book makes the crucial point that each of these localities was shaped by its own set of unique social, cultural, and political circumstances, and that it was these specific circumstances that determined how the local population responded to the erection of these monuments and, by extension, the nationalist ambitions of the Hungarian government. In doing so, this book also illustrates the larger flaws that undermined the attempt to impose Magyar culture on a multi-ethnic country. Notably, a skewed interpretation of Hungary's history, combined with a shortage of funds, insufficient time, government meddling, and an inability to accommodate local sensitivities ensured that even some Magyar nationalists were disappointed with the resulting monuments, while ethnic Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks, and Orthodox Jews boycotted en masse the festivities that accompanied the formal unveiling of these monuments. It is unsurprising, therefore, that following the dismantling of Hungary in 1918, four

of these monuments were immediately demolished, while a fifth, in Zemun, was stripped of its Magyar nationalist trappings.

It is unclear why the author sometimes uses the historic German names of some localities (Pressburg, Theben, and Semlin), sometimes the historic Hungarian names (Brassó and Munkács), and sometimes the modern place name (Nitra). I would also have liked a fuller explanation of why the monument at Pannonhalma was first desecrated and then forgotten, while the monument at Ópusztaszer helped transform the site into a national shrine whose popularity has endured up to the present. These quibbles aside, this is an impressive work of scholarship, readable and compelling, that integrates local and national history, sheds new light on the Hungarian state's efforts to integrate its minorities, and will prove thought provoking and enlightening for both students and scholars of modern Central European history.

#### Note

[1]. Dorothy Barenscott, "Articulating Identity through the Technological Rearticulation of Space: The Hungarian Millennial Exhibition as World's Fair and the Disordering of Fin-de-siècle Budapest," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 3 (2010): 571-590; Samuel Albert, "The Nation for Itself: The 1896 Hungarian Millennial Exhibition and the 1906 Romanian National General Exhibition," in *Cultures of International Exhibitions, 1840-1940: Great Exhibitions to the Margins*, ed. Marta Filapova (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 113-136; and András Gerő, *Imagined History: Chapters from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Hungarian Symbolic Politics*, trans. from Hungarian by Mario D. Fenyo (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2006).

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