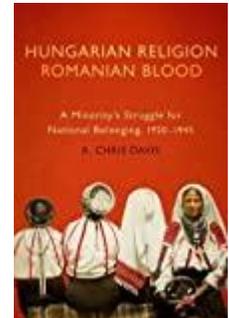


R. Chris Davis. *Hungarian Religion, Romanian Blood: A Minority's Struggle for National Belonging, 1920–1945.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. Illustrations. 272 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-31640-2.



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This is the first part of a brief roundtable on R. Chris Davis's *Hungarian Religion, Romanian Blood*. A second part will follow next week. — Evan Rothera.

This book offers more than its title suggests. The ostensible focus, as explained in the first pages, revolves around the story of one minority's salvation from deportation during World War II accomplished by a tiny group of Catholic clergy. As the argument goes, in the summer of 1942, Romanian Csangos, Hungarian-speaking Catholic peasants from the Romanian province of Moldova whose ancestors lived there for seven hundred or so years, faced the prospect of expulsion into the territory of Hungary. The Hungarian government wanted to arrange the Csangos' "repatriation" and resettlement in the newly acquired disputed territories, which Hungarians had just (re)acquired from Yugoslavia in the south (parts of Bačka and Baranja Counties) and Slovakia in the north (southern Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia). These territories had been lost by Hungary as part of post-World War I territorial restructuring

provided for by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. In 1941, Hungarians had already successfully negotiated with the Romanian government and carried out the resettlement of Szeklers from the Romanian province of Bukovina—another group of Hungarian-speaking Catholic farmers. Since the Romanian Orthodox clergy harbored overtly hostile attitudes toward Csangos (as they did toward Romanian Catholics in general), and Romanian intelligence services depicted Csangos as disloyal to the Romanian state because some of them did apply for relocation, mass expulsion seemed possible and even likely.

However, some Catholic priests who served in Csangos villages organized a campaign of petitions and publications against deportation. They argued that, first, Csangos, although speaking a dialect of Hungarian, were Romanians "by blood," as they were first "Magyarized" in Transylvania when it was dominated by Hungarians and then migrated into Moldova. Second, being Catholic did not preclude Csangos, or any other Romanian citizens, from being "good Romanians." Third, Csangos

demonstrated their love of Romania by their loyal service in the Romanian army during the country's many wars and through their obedience to the country's laws. The first argument was particularly remarkable since it implied that the traditional view of Csangos "as the Christianized descendants of the original Hungarian tribes from central Asia ... was, essentially, a seven-hundred-year-old case of mistaken identity" and that "a millennium of recorded history" had to be deleted (pp. 3-4). In particular, Franciscan friar and parish priest Iosif Petru M. Pal, whom R. Chris Davis titles "the Great Intercessor," "reconstructed the Csango historical narrative and refashioned their identity as 'authentic' Romanians" (p. 163). This campaign proved very effective as it helped prevent the Csangos' deportation and even persuaded the government to grant them official recognition as "ethnically Romanian." Such recognition protected Csangos from various forms of discrimination to which other minorities were subjected.

Told with verve and panache, the story is riveting. Unfortunately, much of it, namely, the part concerning the saving grace of the Catholic clergy, is just that, a good story, only tangentially related to reality. Courageous and ingenious as the efforts and arguments of the Catholic clergy on behalf of their parishioners were, their real import was marginal. To begin, there is no evidence that the Romanian government ever seriously considered deporting the Csangos. Davis refers to the February 1941 proposal made by the Hungarian government of László Bárdossy to the Romanian regime of Ion Antonescu concerning the resettlement of Bukovinian Szeklers, and then adds that Hungarians "even suggested an exchange of populations modeled on the German-Romanian agreement in 1940, which facilitated the relocation of the German population of Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Dobrudja to Germany" (p. 131). This reference is rather baffling, however. First, how could an "exchange of populations" be "modeled" on the resettlement agreement that provided for the simple relocation of ethnic Germans from southern

Bukovina and northern Dobrudja? Nor did this agreement include ethnic Germans from Bessarabia, which by that time had been occupied by the Soviets; it was with the Soviets that the German government signed a convention on the relocation of ethnic Germans from the province. That resettlement did not provide for any "exchange": for example, moving ethnic Romanians from another territory to take the place of expelled ethnic Germans. Thus, it remains obscure as to what kind of scheme the Bárdossy government suggested to Romanians. What is more, Davis fails to inform the reader of whether the German proposal actually included Csangos. Without referencing any documents, Davis states that the "Romanian government was, for the moment, noncommittal, fearing [that] ethnic Hungarians would be resettled in Northern Transylvania [ceded it to Hungary in 1940 under German pressure], a territory that Romania had every intention to reclaim after the war" (p. 131). Again, should the reader assume that "noncommittal" refers to Csangos also, or was that minority's fate not even in the game at that moment? No answer is provided.

One way or another, no action on Csangos' relocation (with the exception of families who volunteered for relocation) was taken or negotiated through March 1942, when the situation in Hungary changed dramatically. For reasons that had nothing to do with Csangos, Regent Admiral Miklós Horthy replaced the Bárdossy government with that of Miklós Kállay, a politician of moderately pro-Western and cautiously anti-German orientation. Besides other changes that Kállay introduced in Hungarian policy, he "ended the business of population transfers, whether forced, negotiated, or otherwise" (p. 135). Kállay remained in power through March 1944, by which time Romanian policy toward their minorities—not only Csangos—changed so dramatically that forcible relocation was no longer considered. It thus appears that the expulsion of Csangos, at one time

rumored and feared, was never in the government's plans.

As to the official recognition of Csangos as persons of "Romanian ethnic origin" and the issuance to them of certificates attesting thereof, that change did have positive consequences in real life, although not exactly in the sense suggested by Davis. The problem is that Davis is confused on the relationship between notions of "citizenship," "nationality," and "ethnic origin" in Romanian legislation and administrative practice. Early in the book he states that the 1924 "Laws [in fact, Law] on Acquiring and Losing Romanian Nationality" made Romanian citizenship "harder to acquire and easier to lose by members of national minorities"; from now on claimants had to first acquire "Romanian nationality before eventually acquiring citizenship" (p. 90). Astonishingly, however, Davis fails to reference the law and, possibly, even consult it, since even a cursory glance of it would have disabused him of this confusion.[1] The law used the term "nationality" as an equivalent to "citizenship." The same was true of "The Regulations on Ascertaining Romanian Nationality," issued in pursuance of the law (usual legislative practice in Romania) and meant to clarify procedural matters, which Davis refers to while mistakenly claiming that it helped "facilitate the recording and cataloguing of the various nationalities [note plural] in the new Romanian territories" (p. 90).[2]

In reality, the "certificates of nationality" provided for by these legal acts were not certificates of ethnic origin but simply testaments of Romanian citizenship, and were to be issued to all residents of Greater Romania on December 1, 1918. Naturalization was a process of acquiring Romanian citizenship by persons willing to do so who did not belong to the aforementioned category and would come to Romania after the said date. This confusion persists throughout the book and creates a number of additional problems. The most important of these problems is the failure to

clearly grasp the legal nature of "certificates of ethnic origin," which entered administrative practice, it seems, in the fall of 1940, when, following the cession of southern Dobrudja to Bulgaria, Romanians expelled between 63,000 and 66,000 ethnic Bulgarians from northern Dobrudja and settled in their stead about 108,000 ethnic Romanians expelled from ceded southern Dobrudja. Since until that moment no government-issued identification documents ascertained a person's ethnicity; establishing who was and who was not an ethnic Bulgarian in ethnically mixed northern Dobrudja became a serious problem. Sometimes, local authorities, who were not authorized to do so, issued certificates of Romanian ethnic origin to persons who might have been "suspected" of Bulgarian ethnicity as a way to protect them from deportation (these attempts worked only sporadically). Shortly afterward, Romanian ethnic origin became a precondition for participation in government-sponsored auctions and other forms of acquiring or renting former Jewish properties expropriated during the so-called Romanianization: only ethnic Romanians could be beneficiaries of such actions. When the Romanian government proceeded to deport various categories of Roma in 1942, many Roma individuals tried to avoid deportation by acquiring such certificates, with the results as sporadic as in the case of ethnic Bulgarians from northern Dobrudja. Finally, although the government never adopted legal regulation providing for discrimination against non-Jewish minorities in economic or other spheres, government bureaucrats, acting on their nationalistic convictions and opportunistic calculations, did routinely discriminate against such minorities, and even boasted about this in their reports to their supervisors, evidently expecting rewards. In such an atmosphere, having a certificate of Romanian ethnic origin became a valuable asset for many non-ethnic minorities, who in 1941 and 1942 could expect further toughening of anti-minority drive of the Romanian government.

The essential aspect of this story, however, was that certificates of ethnic origin had no legal status and were issued outside of any legal framework by local authorities who were acting under dual pressure from their bosses above and their constituents below. All attempts by Romanian government jurists to develop legal criteria for determining the ethnic origin of a person failed due to a number of factors whose detailed exploration does not belong here. (In no way did these legal difficulties preclude the persecution of Jews, whose ethnicity was determined by their religion, as noted in their identifications.) No less important was the fact that the Romanian government refrained from issuing laws that would explicitly discriminate against non-ethnic Romanians, for fear of diplomatic repercussion and retaliatory measures against ethnic Romanians in the respective countries. While Davis is aware of the former aspect—the lack of a legally binding definition of “Romanian ethnic origin”—he ignores the latter one. In a confused passage, he enumerates laws that supposedly barred non-ethnic Romanians from various economic activities. Upon verification, however, the sources to which he refers do not say what he attributes to them (including my own book, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* [2010]), which mentions confidential ministerial instructions and not a law, as Davis says on pages 95 and 98, and legislative acts, which he mischaracterizes). This oversight is important because the lack of any legal status for the notion of “ethnic origin” and the reluctance of the Romanian government to issue laws providing for the discrimination of non-ethnic Romanians allowed members of ethnic minorities to defend their rights against overt discrimination in the courts (Davis seemingly mentions one such case on page 107, although he does not disclose the procedure through which the redress was obtained), although when discrimination was exercised surreptitiously, obtaining judicial redress was virtually impossible.

Thus the Csangos, as well as members of other minorities, strove eagerly to obtain “certificates of Romanian ethnic origin” not so much because of Romanian legislation—a mistake that Davis repeats again and again—but due to the extralegal discriminatory practices of the Romanian bureaucracy, cheered by the ultranationalist part of the populace, as well as by the fear—real and understandable but ultimately unfounded—of expulsion from the country. This is important to bear in mind in order to take due measure both of the nature of the danger that Csangos faced and of the scale of their intercessors’ achievement. Perhaps even more important is to grasp the dramatic shift that the Antonescu regime’s policy toward national minorities underwent by the time Mihai Antonescu (distant relative to the dictator, his vice prime minister, and foreign minister) announced, in July 1943, that from now on Csangos were to be considered “Romanians by blood.” The shift occurred in the fall of 1942 and was revealed on October 13, 1942, when Mihai Antonescu announced, while speaking at a sitting of the Council of Ministers, that from now on the Romanian government would not carry out further deportations. The immediate beneficiaries of this decision were Jews and Roma, both of whom had been subjected to partial deportations up until that very declaration, but soon other minorities started to feel the change as well. Not only were plans for population exchanges shelved indefinitely, but Romanization also effectively stopped and discriminatory measures were virtually abolished. The shift was a function of the changing grand strategy of the country away from Axis Powers, whose ultimate defeat was becoming clearer day by day, and toward closer relations with Britain and America. Instead of trying to rid the country of minorities, the regime, and in particular its foreign minister, was eager to present their country as fully civilized and a protector of minority rights. The treatment of Csangos was thus just a small piece in the much broader picture. They were beneficiaries of this shift, one among other minorities, and not the

most conspicuous one. When in March 1944 (not 1943, as Davis says) Mihai Antonescu labeled at a sitting of the Council of Ministers Csangos as “Romanian Catholics” and promised to treat them, as he put it, “in the most perfect manner,” he promptly added: “[as well as] all minorities in the country” (p. 158).

Although profound, the shift in Romanian policy was not surprising. From the end of World War I, out of whose ruins Greater Romania emerged, and through the end of World War II, Romania’s policy toward “its” minorities was largely opportunistic and dictated by foreign policy considerations. While suspicious of minorities’ supposed “centrifugal” tendencies and eager to Romanianize them as soon as possible, Romanian elites were determined to abstain from actions that could jeopardize their country’s standing on the international arena, and in particular in Western democracies, whose support was instrumental for the country’s very survival in the treacherous international climate. As soon as Nazi Germany forced France to surrender and expelled the British from the European continent in the summer of 1940, many of the same people who had advocated for the tolerant treatment of minorities in the 1920s and most of the 1930s became proponents of an “ethnically pure Romania,” which meant getting rid of minorities. Conversely, when the tide of war changed against the Axis Powers, they reverted to the stance they had maintained in the previous two decades. There was nothing particular about the Csangos in all of this, just transactional business as usual, so characteristic of Romanian nationalist politics.

As follows from the preceding, I disagree with Davis on the central issue of the book, the role of Catholic clerics in World War II Moldova in saving Csangos from deportation and obtaining redress of their legal status. Nor do I consider their rhetorical strategies deserving of as much praise as the author heaps on them. I do not see much ingenuity in emphasizing the compatibility of Catholi-

cism with “Romanianism,” as this was a standard trope in Catholics’ defense since long before World War II, and as Moldovan Catholics had powerful allies among Transylvanian Greek Catholic Romanians, whose patriotism nobody could seriously question. Besides, seeing Christian Orthodoxy as *conditio sine qua non* for being “truly Romanian” was popular among only a part of Romanian nationalist circles, and not representative of their mainstream. As to the “biological” dimension of Csango identity, securing eugenicist Petru Ramneanțu’s participation in the project designed to “prove” the Csangos’ Romanian “blood” was an obvious choice since he had already pulled this trick with respect to Transylvanian Szeklers, and it was well known that Ramneanțu’s “findings” always turned out supportive of the thesis he set for himself to “prove.”

With all that, I read most of the book with great interest and fascination. In fact, much of it is dedicated not to Csangos as much as to the analysis—which I found informative, sensible, and fascinating—of official discourses on national identity and ways of national belonging in Hungary and Romania in the interwar period and the early 1940s. Among producers and reproducers of such discourses, Davis features politicians, government officials, theologians, social scientists, historians, ethnographers, geographers, and demographers: in a word, the whole world of “experts” who busied themselves with helping to consolidate new states and secure their durability through various rhetorical, educational, and social engineering projects. Davis’s great advantage is mastery of both Hungarian and Romanian. Delving into the mass of primary sources, both published and archival, he paints a riveting picture of the parallel hardening of nationalistic thought and radicalization of proposed “solutions” in both Hungary and Romania. The almost perfect symmetry of these developments in the two countries, which saw themselves as polar opposites, creates an eerie feeling of approaching doom, to which both countries were heading by seemingly irresistible

forces of destiny—only to be stopped in their tracks by the fundamental change in the balance of global forces, a change that upended the calculations of these countries’ elites, closed hitherto seemingly available opportunities, and created new problems and possibilities. This discussion alone is a serious achievement that makes the book fascinating and well worth reading.

Notes

[1]. Legea nr. 724/1924 privitoare la dobândirea și pierderea naționalității române, *Mon-*

itorul Oficial, pt. 1, no. 41, February 24, 1924, <https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/gi3tgnjsgeyq/legea-nr-724-1924-privitoare-la-dobandirea-si-pierderea-nationalitatii-romane> (accessed November 2, 2020).

[2]. For the text of the “Regulations,” see *Codul general al României*, vols. 11-12, *Legi noi de unificare Cuprinzând regulamentele și decretul aplicabile în tot cuprinsul țării*, in *Hamangiu* (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei “Universală” Alcalay & Co., 1927), 289-97.

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