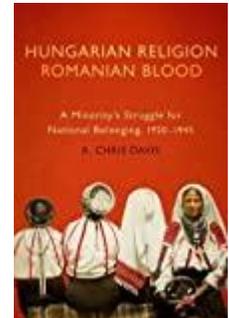


**R. Chris Davis.** *Hungarian Religion, Romanian Blood: A Minority's Struggle for National Belonging, 1920–1945.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. Illustrations. 272 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-31640-2.



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

R. Chris Davis chooses not to name but to picture on the book cover the minority community whose “contested identity” he focuses on and does this in line with his conclusion after more than a decade of research: the Csangos are “‘ethnographically’ one thing or the other (or both), since it is usually the science (and scientism) and always the *graphos*, the writing, that tells us so” (p. xi). The author is well aware of writing a narrative of a “curious historical problem” and opts for a transnational and comparative historiographic context—involving both Romania and Hungary—when focusing on the Csangos in the period 1920–45 (p. xiii).

The book points out at the beginning the problematic nature of categories like “ethnicity” and “race” and underlines their central role in historical understanding of East-Central Europe. It is conceived as a case study on “ethnocentrism from

competing historical narratives on contested minority communities,” which analyzes whether some minorities readily commuted or concealed their nationality and ethnicity to preserve their religion, and whether religion was a more salient marker of identity and a more meaningful social practice (p. xii). The usual question, who the Csangos are, is replaced after a comprehensively researched and convincingly written overview of definitions and theories by another question, what Csangoness is. This innovative approach allows Davis to avoid the old narratives of the literature and to follow Călin Cotoi’s proposal to analyze “figures of Csangoness,” emphasizing the already mentioned agency of minorities (p. 15).

The extensive introduction, which includes a *dramatis personae*, allows nonexperts of the topic to comprehend the historical constellation in which the Csangos were struggling for national belonging in the period 1920–45. The Csangos are taken as examples that minorities were more than just objects to political decisions; they shaped the politics and history of nations, states, and

churches, and were actors on the European level. Davis concludes from this perspective that they “offer a lesson in the rigidity and malleability of identities under pressure” (p. 6).

When contextualizing national and ethnic imagining, the book does not proceed strictly chronologically and is structured along main topics like demography, the sacred, the profane, national codification, resettlement, and recertification. Davis pays great attention to and lists important Hungarian and Romanian intellectual circles who shaped national discourses in historical writings, literature, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and theology, and shaped the frame of national discourses that the Csangos had to fit in. The analytical clarity drawing from numerous archival sources and the referred vast literature is impressive, although at some points one is puzzled why a few relevant works are omitted. For example, when summing up philosophical and literary discourses in interwar Romania the reference to Marta Petreu is missing, whose contribution to this aspect of the topic is hard to overlook (for example, *Generația '27 între Holocaust și Gulag: Mircea Eliade și Klaus Mann despre generația tânără* [2016] and *Un trecut deocheat sau “Schimbarea la față a României”* [1999]). Similarly, when writing about the legionary movement, the research findings of Oliver Jens Schmitt are not considered (*Capitan Codreanu: Aufstieg und Fall des rumänischen Faschistenführers* [2016], also available in Romanian translation). Such omissions might explain why the reader waits in vain to read about the role of the periodical *Gândirea* or the movement called *gândirism*, despite reading about individual actors. Much more disturbing, however, is the author’s contention that Hungarians introduced Greek Catholicism in Transylvania. This not only overlooks the role of the Habsburgs in the region but also is the kind of mistake that should have been avoided in a book that puts a special emphasis on religious matters. Another avoidable mistake was labeling Greek the lingua

franca in most Romanian cities in the mid-nineteenth century.

The best written and revealing parts of the book are the descriptions of the Catholic counter-offensives aiming to nationally recategorize the Csangos to save them from state repressions. Examples such as that of the priest Iosif Frollo and his involvement in the Legion of the Archangel Michael show the contradictions of ideological engagements that the book excellently illustrates on several occasions. At such points, the narrative interweaves the personal story with the broader debates, successfully combining the micro and macro perspectives. Davis makes another important point in discussing the theories regarding the “denationalized Romanians” and presenting works on Szeklers that also show the transferability of the denationalization model to the case of the Csangos for whom recasting meant a solution against state repressions (p. 28).

The reading flow is sometimes disturbed by the repetition of already explained processes (e.g., in connection with *Volksgeschichte* [folk history] or the political discourses of the thirties), although some readers might appreciate the repetition if they are unfamiliar with the material. Instead of repeating general remarks on the political context more examples would have been helpful, for instance, in the case of the local officials listing Romanian nationality as the base for Romanian citizenship. Since legislation did not precisely define Romanian ethnicity and “blood” and specify how they were to be proven, the confusion of local officials in issuing ethnic certificates is understandable. In the case of Csangos, the great confusion is also mirrored in the various descriptions on the certificates: “Romanian nationality, of Csango Romanian ethnic origin”; “Csango Romanian nationality”; “Romanian-Csango nationality”; “Romanian nationality and ethnic origin, of Catholic religion”; and “ethnic Romanian origin, being born of Romanian parents” (p. 103).

Davis also depicts the schooling situation of the Csangos and the measures aiming to change their religious practices, which are often the subject of Hungarian studies of the topic. He offers a series of examples to illustrate how Csangos were discriminated against and lost civil rights so that they could not sell or buy land, which would have been of vital interest for them, because most of them worked in agriculture. Similarly, they faced discrimination in schools or when trying to register “Catholic names” (p. 113). Davis presents several official complaints handed to officials or ministries. Even the Catholic bishop of Iași Mihai Robu wrote to Ion Antonescu asking to remove offensive references in textbooks to Romanian Catholics as “Csangos” or Hungarians.

An important contribution of the book is the contextualization of secret service reports about the Csangos between 1942 and 1943. It is here that Davis has special merits continuing approaches like that of Meinolf Ahrens. The repressions against and the difficulties of the Csangos are well known; what is less analyzed is the national and international context of the measures to which this case study pays great attention. One of the consequences of this focus is that the top-down perspective necessarily dominates and the bottom-up perspective gets marginalized.

The last chapter, “The Cry of Blood,” returns to the question of what Csango is and focuses on the activity of the representants of the Catholic clergy who regularly published articles or monographs on the topic. Father Iosif M. Pal and Ioan Mărtinaș played a major role in producing alternative historical narratives. The head of the Franciscan Order in Moldavia, Father Pal, regularly wrote to Marshal Antonescu and the apostolic nuncio in Bucharest, and negated—just as Frolo—the popular claims that Orthodoxism was an essential component to Romanianism and defined the Csangos as Catholic Romanians.

At this point, relevant Romanian scientists writing on minority population are considered

again. Through indexing blood groups, Petru Râmneanțu, racial anthropologist and Greek Catholic from Banat, confirmed the Romanian ethnic origin of the Csangos “by the scientific standard of the day” (p. 147). It was evident that he was commissioned by the Antonescu regime to confirm Pal’s theories. Just as Pal and Mărtinaș, Râmneanțu also rejected the ethnonym Csango and a commission confirmed the scientific result: the Csangos were recognized as ethnic Romanians, being of Romanian nationality and of Romanian-Csango ethnic origin. This ambiguous solution raised a lot of questions, which were ignored in favor of a political solution that was in line with the interests of the country on the international political floor. Davis underlines that the government directly oversaw research institutes on minorities, and the involved researchers were Greek Catholics mainly from Transylvania and Banat and socialized in Austro-Hungary. It is very well explained that the research under the guidance of the government was already part of solving territorial questions after the war so that the measures two years before had to be labeled by Antonescu as a “mistake,” a “simple confusion” (p. 159).

In light of the above, the conclusion of Davis can be nuanced a bit: “The story of the Csangos is therefore not so much about upheaval and distress..., or even identities lost or found, but rather about the ways in which communities and individuals can utilize their background to preserve that which they cherish most: their home, their family, their church, one another” (p. 164-65). The book tells the story of (re)writing the history of Csangos in the chosen period; it is less about the communities and individuals, although they are of course repeatedly in focus, and more about defining a community from above.

The overview of the complex religious and scientific debates on Csangos is excellent. It shows how the elite supported political decisions or worked against them (e.g., Frolo or Pal), but there are only short descriptions about the Csangos

themselves (e.g., cinema owner, school problems). However, this is not meant as a critique, as there is enough literature on that topic and the book offers excellent analysis about generating historical narratives, what comes short in the title, which kind of perpetuates national topoi. Quotation marks could have signaled the necessary distance to nationalizing religion and “blood” for political purposes (see quotations, e.g., pp. 51, 93,

103, or on several other occasions, pp. xxi, 29) within the mechanisms of a nationalizing state trying to homogenize its population.

Finally, one can conclude that in the “holistic interpretation ‘of the making of the Csangos’” that Davis had aimed at, he succeeded excellently, and the book is a great achievement thanks to its transnational historical, political, and cultural approach (p. 170).

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