Neither Poland nor Ukraine is ordinarily imagined as a mountainous country. And yet, as Patrice M. Dabrowski describes in her fascinating book, these “quintessentially lowland” peoples “came to be particularly enamored of mountains” in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. 4). Those who “discovered” different regions of the Carpathians in this era were engaged in a complex, double-sided process of mutual transformation. On the one hand, and despite the interest of many of them in preserving these regions’ natural beauty and cultural specificity, the incorporation of highlands into broader national communities inevitably changed both highlanders’ ways of life and the physical landscape of the highlands. On the other, the discoverers looked to the highlands as a source of inspiration and renewal for the nation as a whole, anchoring the national community in a sense of cultural authenticity and providing physical rejuvenation for its increasingly urban elites.

The book draws on a rich and varied body of primary source material, archival as well as published, to reconstruct and analyze encounters with and debates about the highlands. It follows a largely chronological trajectory, starting with the famous discovery of the High Tatras, south of Kraków, by prominent visitors from the lowlands in the nineteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, the budding resort of Zakopane had developed into the summer capital of Poland’s artistic and literary elite. A Warsaw physician, Tytus Chałubiński, who gained particular renown as a “discoverer” of the region, pioneered the symbiotic relationship between national elites and highland residents. He famously spent one touristic visit caring for local inhabitants stricken by a typhus epidemic; in turn, he encouraged urban friends and colleagues to restore their own health by coming to breathe the invigorating air of the mountains. The artist and writer Stanisław Witkiewicz further amplified this promotion with On the Mountain Pass, an account of explorations of the Tatras that was serialized in the Polish press. Witkiewicz idealized not only the natural beauty of the highlands but also the art and architecture of highlanders as a genuine—perhaps the most genuine—form of Polish national culture. The final years before the First World War witnessed vigorous debates about how the region’s development as a national spa destination should proceed. Dabrowski describes these debates as pitting pragmatists of local origin, who sought to ac-
commodate the interests of both ordinary highlanders and Habsburg imperial elites, against idealists drawn from the intelligentsia of other partition zones (especially the Russian Empire) who envisioned the Tatras as the setting for more radical and fully national social experiments. The ironies of these debates were perhaps best captured by Witkiewicz’s design for a parish church in the “Zakopane style,” a style that was promptly rejected by many local residents as inappropriate for a church. But Dabrowski avoids presenting the encounter between the local and the national in purely oppositional terms. She characterizes those who settled in the region and came to identify passionately with it as “neonatives” rather than in-migrants or outsiders. While certainly shaped by asymmetries of power, competing visions of the region were, in this account, more akin to a family feud than a ruthless imperial conquest.

In the book’s second section, the geographic focus shifts to the Eastern Carpathians, in the southeastern corner of the Habsburg crownland of Galicia and of the interwar Polish state, today the southwestern corner of Ukraine. Whereas the discovery of the Tatras involved engagement with a single (Polish) nationalizing program, the discovery of the Eastern Carpathians was more nationally ambiguous and became, by the early twentieth century, a matter of heated nationalist contestation. Both Polish and Ukrainian activists claimed the local Hutsul population as part of their respective national communities. Each side, not surprisingly, was keen to point out how the other nationalizing program was undermining the authenticity of local traditions. One Polish professor complained that some Hutsul embroidery in the interwar period was abandoning the earlier use of many different colors of thread in favor of exclusive use of blue and yellow—the colors of the Ukrainian flag. As the politically dominant orientation, Polish national institutions exerted even more pressure on residents of the Hutsul region to adapt their cultural and economic activities to accommodate broader audiences and markets. But Dabrowski also takes pains to highlight the agency that Hutsuls exercised within these nationalizing encounters. Members of the Ukrainian-oriented Hutsul Theater, for example, described their performances before lowland Ukrainian audiences as an empowering opportunity to share local culture with a wider world. And efforts by the interwar Polish state to incorporate Hutsuls into a heterogeneous “Poland of regions,” the author suggests, encountered at least a cautiously positive response among some local activists.

The book’s final section shifts focus back to the West, to the Bieszczadz highlands that became Poland’s new southeastern frontier following border shifts at the end of the Second World War. Most of the region’s native Lemko population was relocated either across the border to Ukraine or to Poland’s western and northern lands, newly acquired from Germany. This demographic upheaval contributed to perceptions of this part of the highlands as empty terrain, thus an opportunity for radical transformation but also for preservation. Initiatives by the new Communist regime emphasized large-scale development, from dams generating hydroelectric power to highways facilitating mass tourism—including, crucially, hard-currency-wielding foreign tourists. Alongside these high-profile projects, exclusive retreats were quietly carved out for the party elite. By the 1970s, the state-socialist program was subject to increasingly vocal critiques. Students and other activists called for stricter environmental protection while also championing further exploration of the region by “qualified” individual tourists. Dabrowski notes that the rhetoric of those campaigning for the “rediscovery” of the Bieszczady often invoked, albeit in ambiguous ways, the “discoverers” of the Tatras a century earlier: a new generation of Poles would simultaneously preserve and be reinvigorated by the natural authenticity of the highlands. And like those earlier activists, they would encounter skepticism as well as sympathy among local residents, who had their own diverse ideas.
about whether and how economic “development” should be embraced.

As should be clear from this summary, Dabrowski is admirably open-minded and even-handed in explaining the perspectives of different actors and the visions of the highlands that they articulated. While engaging in ongoing, nuanced exploration of the relationship between the local and the national, she is attentive to those, such as the Jewish residents of the region, who could never quite speak on behalf of either local society or the nation but nonetheless played significant roles in the mutual constitution of both. In addition to its rigorous underlying research and subtle argumentation, the book is also beautifully written, conveying the unabashed love of the highlands that animated its wide-ranging subjects and that is also clearly shared by the author. It deserves a wide readership among those interested in Polish history, the broader history of nationalization, and environmental history.

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