

REVIEWS

Erdély Története 3 Vols. (various authors)

Too much of the existing writing on Transylvania suffers from the fatal flaw being one-dimensional. These writings assume tacitly that there is only one history or politics or sociology or whatever of Transylvania and that all others are illegitimate, malign, stupid, etc. The central divide is, of course, nationality. Any approach infused by the national element begins from the proposition that the Hungarian/Rumanian/German/Ruritanian, etc. history of Transylvania is the sole possible account and that anyone who fails to recognize this is an enemy. That in outline is the nationalist case. In practice, of course, the actual representation of the nationalist approach may be more sophisticated and be decked out with a variety of scientific or pseudo-scientific ornamentation, ranging from pretentious footnotes, through the scattering of disrelated statistical data, to the appearance of logical argumentation.

This line of thought is, in the final analysis, great labour and little profit. Works having these assumptions as their ultimate origins may be full of weird and wonderful data and, to that extent, be useful as a store-house of information, but otherwise their status must remain marginal. They will always be marked by their polemical and teleological antecedents and suffer from reductionism. They may have their value in the way that fairy tales do, but they will not make a contribution to cognitive growth, except perhaps as examples of the pathologies that abound in national-cultural disputes.

The disbenefit of this mind-set is not, though it should be, self-evident. Essentially, if an entire community is united in its belief that the moon is made of green cheese and, furthermore, that anyone who denies this and argues that the moon is in reality constituted wholly of a mixture of brimstone and turpentine is wrong, it will have difficulty in coming to terms with the true nature of selenology. Transylvania has for a long time had this unreal quality in both the Hungarian and Rumanian mind-set. Indeed, for the ideologies of both nations it plays a role quite distinct from the real socio-economic and political features that the province possesses. Thus in approaching any work dealing with Transylvania, whether it is of Hungarian or of Rumanian provenance, one must begin by identifying these *a priori* assumptions that are used to create the matrix within which the works in question are formulated.

My argument, therefore, is that in their approach to the scientific analysis – historical, political, economic, ethnic, etc. – of Transylvania, both Hungarians and Rumanians are handicapped by the danger of being caught up in a dualism, in which the link between the realm of ideas and the realm of material objects is weak to non-existent. This proposition comes very close to what I would term “political oneirataxia” the inability to tell the difference between fantasy and reality in politics.¹

It is crucial to recognize the existence of political oneirataxia, seeing that the three volume *History of Transylvania*² under review must evidently pass the test before it can be considered as scientific or not. In a word, not least because it has already been assailed in the most bitter terms as

¹ This concept is virtually identical to the term “political hysteria” used by István Bibó, but is preferred to “hysteria” given the connotations that the word has in colloquial English.

² Erdély Története

propaganda by Rumanians at home and abroad, any reviewer must decide whether or not the work passes muster as a contribution to the scientific writing on Central European history.

My own view is that it does, but this does not mean that it passes with flying colours. On the contrary, precisely because the work deserves to be taken very seriously, its shortcomings, whether these derive from the inadequacy of the authors approach or the constraints of politics, must be subjected to the same strict analysis that all scientific argument deserves. In this connection, I should like to make it clear that I am no specialist on the mediaeval or early modern periods and can say nothing on the earlier parts of the *History* except that they read well and are interesting. But I do have views on what the book has to say about Transylvania in the post-Ausgleich period, especially in the 20th century.

The section on the interwar history of Transylvania is, to my mind, unsatisfactory and represents a missed opportunity to tackle certain issues of current relevance in uncovering the true nature of the province. Crucially, this chapter is not really marked by any inner understanding of the fact, for fact it is, that Transylvania is in numerous respects qualitatively different from Hungary, that its population of whatever nationality has a different perception of events and that it underwent a markedly different set of experiences from what took place in Hungary. Indeed, it is little more than a data bank and avoids asking hard questions or tackling real issues. Thus while Hungarian society lived through the Soviet Republic and the White Terror, Transylvanians did not. While Hungary experienced the construction of a neo-k.u.k. political system under Horthy and Bethlen, Transylvania did not. Conversely, Hungary did not undergo the cultural and political dislocation of the superimposition of an alien political system, whereas Transylvania, Rumanians as much as Hungarians, did.

One often has the sense while reading this book that its authors have difficulty with the differentness of Transylvania, both at the affective and the experiential levels. My argument in this connection is that there are aspects of Transylvania that are as different from Hungary as, say, Poland and just because many of its inhabitants speak Hungarian, regard themselves as Hungarian and are members of a broadly defined Hungarian ethno-cultural community, this does not mean that they think, behave, respond as Hungarians from Hungary do. To insist on this assumption, which many Hungarians in Hungary unconsciously do, is to fall into the trap of reductionism sketched in the foregoing and to deny the Transylvanian Hungarians the choice of determining their own destiny, which incidentally is exactly what they accuse the Rumanians of doing (correctly in my view).

The missing element from the *History* is any attempt to confront the fact that Transylvania is a multi-national province and has been for most of its history. The review of the Rumanian national movement in the 19th century and references to the activities of the Rumanian state are no substitutes for a deeper analysis of Hungarian-Rumanian relations, which would take as its starting point the proposition that the two nationalities in Transylvania influence each other's perceptions and self-perceptions, auto and heterostereotypes and consequently the Hungarians' political behaviour must differ from those of the Hungarians in Hungary. There is no suggestion in the *History* that the Rumanians of Transylvania might likewise have and have had different political aspirations from those of their co-nationals in the Regat and that this, too, might have had an impact on the Hungarian history of the province.

There is a widespread view that all Hungarians share the same political identity, that the Hungarians of Transylvania have little or nothing in common with the Rumanians of Transylvania, that their development has for all practical purposes been left untouched by their continuous interaction with Rumanians and with the Rumanian state and, that this should be so. Indeed, some – not that there is any trace of this position in the *History* – go farther and argue that anyone who denies the normativity of the political unity of the Hungarian nation is exposing it to danger. In reality, any analysis of Transylvania from the Hungarian standpoint, which I would insist has a validity within the terms I have set out, should, inter alia, ask the question, in how many ways can one be Hungarian? Is there only one, the one defined within the confines of the Hungarian state, or are there others?

The section on the post-1945 period is even more sketchy and innocent of analysis than the interwar passages and, perhaps this is understandable if not exactly excusable by the scientific criteria that I am using here. Yet here too there is a missed opportunity. By undertaking a comparative analysis of what happened in Transylvania, using developments in Hungary as the bench-mark, much light could have been shed precisely on the qualities of the Hungarian ethno-cultural community, on how its members respond to a very similar experience (the Stalinist transformation), where the differences between the two lie and why. My point here is that Hungary represents a standard of comparison for Transylvania (and vice versa) and, because different parts of the Hungarian ethno-cultural community are involved, aspects of the aetiology of Hungary's socio-political development could have been validly illuminated.

It might be argued that the authors of the *History* refrained from undertaking this kind of analysis for fear of the repercussions from Rumania. If so, this proved to be a miscalculation and, indeed, would by definition always have been a miscalculation. The central point here is that just as Transylvania performs certain oneirataxic functions in the Hungarian mind-set, it has equivalent ones in the Rumanian, with the consequence that no writing about Transylvania from Hungary will ever be accepted by Rumanians, simply because it is Hungarian. The inference is that the authors of the *History* did not think through their contextual analysis, and failed to see that whatever they wrote – probably even if they had filled all the three volumes with Daco-Roman apologetics – it would have been denounced by the Rumanians as antagonistic, ill-willed, malevolent, chauvinistic etc. So, there was nothing to lose. The 20th century sections of the book could have been approached with the same rigour that the authors applied to the earlier periods.

The implication of this omission is that opinion in Hungary has been denied a chance to be brought face to face with the reality, as opposed to the oneirataxia, of Transylvania. Some of this confrontation would have been painful, some of it would have been difficult to assimilate and some would certainly have been fruitful in encouraging at least some Hungarians to reflect on their own predicament as a nation and to dispel some of the mythic fog that surrounds the thorny topic of Hungary and the successor states and the relationship between Hungarians from different politics.

When looked at from the safe distance of London, one is struck by the two ultimately inappropriate roles that Transylvania is called upon to play in the matrix of Hungarian politics. In the first place, Transylvania is endowed with a powerful symbolic role at the level of affective meaning as the land that guaranteed the continuity of Hungarian statehood and this role, in turn, has allowed Transylvania to be metamorphosed into something other than the flesh and blood, rocks and earth that actually make up the province. Transylvania has been endowed with near supernatural qualities of ethnic purity and authenticity which it does not possess, never has possessed and, incidentally, cannot possess. Transylvania the myth land exists in the realm of ideas and cannot be conflated with the Transylvania that actually constitutes the north-western third of Rumania.

Second, Transylvania is increasingly coming to play the role of a surrogate in contemporary Hungarian politics – as political, economic, social conditions in Hungary deteriorate and as the pressure on the Hungarians of Rumania intensifies, there has emerged a growing tendency to see the former in terms of the latter, to merge the two and to concentrate on seeking to improve the situation of the minority as a substitute for doing something in Hungary. I have defined this process much more starkly, of course, than it exists in real life and what I have sketched should be treated as an ideal type.

Nevertheless, the process is real. And because Transylvania and Hungary are not the same, concentration on the former is a distraction from the problems of the latter, made all the easier by the sense that at the end of the day, there is very little that Hungarians in Hungary can effectively do to improve conditions in Rumania. In this connection, a clearer, more rigorous approach in the *History* could have made a major contribution to clearing the intellectual decks in Hungary. And that, in turn, could have been an important step in the still outstanding process of assisting Hungarian opinion to come to terms with the loss of empire of 1918. At the very least, this kind of analysis

would have illuminated what actually was lost, as distinct from what the myth values prompt Hungarians to believe they lost.

If I have been critical of the *History* that is because I believe that its appearance in the final form that it has taken represents a missed opportunity. On the other hand, it would be unfair not to reflect on the many positive aspects of this publication, both textually and contextually. As regards the former, the *History* offers a clear narrative account, in considerable detail, of Transylvania. Regarding the latter, for all my reservations, I take the view that the work is well up to the best standards of history writing in Europe, that where there are details or emphases that are open to question, these are entirely within the scientific paradigm. In a word, as far as I am concerned, this is a work of history and not of propaganda or apologetics. The fact that it may not fully satisfy all its readers, myself included, in no way derogates from this proposition. On the other hand, the fact that it has been singled out by Rumanian polemicists does nothing either to enhance or detract from its qualities. It must be judged not by the criteria of politics or nationalist frustration, whether Rumanian or Hungarian or any other, but by those that are accepted as scientific in the broad European cultural arena. By this test, the book must be assessed positively. The news that foreign language editions are under preparation is welcome. It deserves a readership wider than the one that is guaranteed by the Hungarian language.

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