

Empty Signs, Historical Imaginaries: The Entangled Nationalization of Names and Naming in a Late Habsburg Borderland. By Ágoston Berecz. New York–Oxford: Berghahn, 2020. xiv + 335 pp.

This fascinating monograph provides an exhaustive and remarkably archival-based discussion of the sociocultural history of competing and intertwined nationalizing processes. Although the title of the book leaves the reader wondering for a moment about the precise temporal and geographical framework of its content, the maps, tables, charts, and various meticulously processed indexes included in the body text and as parts of the appendix profusely compensate for the riddle-like title. The latter may well be tied up with the tricky problem of how to refer unambiguously to the diverse regions of the erstwhile Kingdom of Hungary, including an area populated characteristically by Romanians (and, apart from Hungarians, in a more circumscribed way by Transylvanian Saxons). All the same, instead of using the elusive term “late Habsburg borderland,” it might have been more informative to indicate that the book is primarily about the fairly vast eastern borderland of Dualist Hungary, which was populated for the most part by Romanian speakers.

The book admittedly combines three major ambitions by scrutinizing the spontaneous uses and official regulations of proper names pertaining to people and places in the territory indicated above. It addresses first the complicated topic of the so called “nationality question” of Dualist Hungary, i.e., the rivalry of Hungarian state nationalism and the national/ist movements defying it in pervading for the most part prenational masses with symbolic elements of conflicting national high cultures evolving side by side. Secondly, among nationally germane symbolic elements, proper names were and are of vital importance, and yet the study of the trends in their usage and the methods according to which they have been standardized seldom find place even in the writings of cultural historians. Berecz, however, not only focuses on them, but by carefully analysing their capacity for conveying or evading nationalist messages, he decidedly favors the “from below” approach to the study of nationhood.

The book is broken into three sections each of which is further divided into three chapters. The sections are arranged according to a gradual and systematic logic in a chronological and structural sense, focusing first on the ways in which common people traditionally christened themselves and the places where they lived (*Peasants*), then on the intensifying ideologization of the inventory of names by the nationalizing elites (*Nationalisms*), and finally on the state’s intervention

through the official regulation of the usage of first names, family names, and place names (*The State*).

As for given names, there was a highly unequal distribution of typically “national” first names (i.e., historical, pagan, or Latinate in regard to Romanians) between the elite and the peasantry of all three major subpopulations of the area. However, Romanian peasants were noticeably not only susceptible to adapt Hungarian name variants (unlike their Saxon counterparts and the nineteenth-century Romanian and Saxon elites), the dissemination of national (Latinate) names was quite slow among them, even though they were in the ascendent as time passed (Chapter 1). It was only after having taken over the registration of the population from churches in the 1890s that the Hungarian state started to issue decrees on the *official* forms of personal names (Chapter 7). According to Berecz’s thorough investigation in the field, most local officials nevertheless continued writing first names in their vernacular forms and mother-tounge spellings while recording them in their official Hungarian forms in the civil registry. Moreover, resulting evidently from the strong dissimilarity between Western-rite and Byzantine-rite calendars, “a significant minority of Romanian names were either declared untranslatable, subjected to a merely cosmetic Magyarization or outright re-Latinized’ (p.170) by the experts called upon by the Ministry to Magyarize the national onomasticon.

The issue of surnames was much more complicated. Compared to Transylvanian Saxons and Hungarians, family names among Romanians were relatively recent and not meant to be real ethnic markers for long (Chapter 2). Berecz draws a clear distinction between the traditionally high rate of Hungarian-influenced surnames (of various kinds) and the comparatively low number of people who Magyarized family names among the country’s Romanian population (Chapters 4 and 5). This remarkable and at the same time mutually embarrassing phenomenon added up to the inveteracy of two complementary but in effect unfounded myths: the one lamenting the submerged Magyardom of the region at large, and the other about incriminating “all-time” Hungarian elites who had planned the Magyarization of Romanian peasants over the course of centuries. The first topos seemed to be corroborated by the fact that Romanian-populated areas abounded in settlement names of Hungarian origin, while advocates of the latter commonplace implicitly projected the contemporary family-name Magyarization movement (a massive phenomenon after 1880) onto a murky past. Whereas the voluntary Magyarization of surnames remained a typically upper-class social movement (proverbially common among Neolog Jews), it was

nonetheless true that the higher one stood on the social ladder in contemporary Hungary, the less one needed to alter one's inherited name (*viz.* mostly lower-ranking state employees were urged to Magyarize their surnames during the Bánffy Era in the late 1890s). In this respect, noble names indicated the benchmark: even nationally committed Romanian politicians clung to their Magyar surname along with its spelling if it had a venerable pedigree. In addition, the vicissitudes of Romanian orthographical trends certainly did not play into the hands of intellectuals who wanted Romanian surnames to be written "authentically," as their etymological tradition looked back only a few decades of history and became outdated as soon as the ensuing phonemic trend prevailed in spelling from the 1870s onwards (Chapter 8).

In contrast with semantically and ideologically uninterested rural populations (Chapter 3), for nineteenth-century nationalists, the very form of place names asserted symbolic ownership of the respective territory. As Berecz insightfully underlines, "officials and specialists in charge of renaming campaigns [...] validated the principle that place names belong to the entire nation embodied in the state rather than to the people who use them" (p.241). The official Hungarian renaming campaign from 1898 on (amply scrutinized in the book's longest section, found in Chapter 9) was not only among the earliest internationally, but excelled both in elaboration and scope. Yet the new official toponyms pertaining to the area under discussion were introduced only around 1910 (with the exception of two counties in southern Transylvania, which were left out altogether because of the war), so the enforcement of the law on the official names of localities was preceded by its Croatian counterpart in 1907, which put limitations on the public use of Hungarian name variants there. The renaming process coupled Magyarization and simple disambiguation of settlement names, coordinated and supervised by statisticians, archival, and other experts, who consulted local councils and county assemblies alike about their decisions. Nevertheless, most appeals arising from locals were similarly rejected by the National Communal Registry Board as the whimsical name Magyarizing proposals of county assemblies. On the whole, almost 20 percent of the locality names were Magyarized during the campaign in the area, though with enormous regional disparities (the campaign hardly affected Saxon counties and had only a slight effect on the other Transylvanian counties with Romanian majorities, while it had a strong effect on the counties in Banat and the densely Romanian-populated part of eastern Hungary). Although the process was justified as inevitable modernization combined with the restoration of genuine

historical names, less than a third of the newly coined toponyms were actually based on archival data. Furthermore, many of the freshly Magyarized Romanian toponyms took the place of already native exonyms of Hungarian origin; in other words authentic but in appearance distorted variants were re-Magyarized with the use of new fabrications.

In his conclusions, Berecz expounds on the manifold findings with which his book teems. Of these findings, I would mention only the mostly elite character of nineteenth-century nationalism, the slowness and difficulties in nationalizing rural masses, and the non-negligible constraints which Hungarian state nationalism had to face, which were preeminently forceful in Transylvania, where strong church autonomy and ethnic separation had been the rule for centuries, not to mention the contemporary ethno-demographic reality. While it is devoted to a seemingly narrow subject, Berecz's monograph calls attention to the crucial symbolic relevance of the nationalization of proper names. It thus constitutes a major contribution to the study of nationhood and nationalism.

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