

Varga, Bálint. Bárdi, Nándor, Csilla Fedinec, László Szarka, eds., *Minority Hungarian Communities in the Twentieth Century*. Translated by Brian McLean. Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 2011. Pp. 859. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

---

Bárdi, Nándor, Csilla Fedinec, László Szarka, eds., *Minority Hungarian Communities in the Twentieth Century*. Translated by Brian McLean. Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 2011. Pp. 859.

Reviewed by Bálint Varga, University of Mainz

Since the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918 large Magyar-speaking communities have lived under the rule of its successor states. Indeed, in 1918 one third and today still circa one fourth of Magyars in the Carpathian Basin live outside of Hungary. The presence of these Magyar-speaking communities in the emerging nation-states of (Czecho-) Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania and the Yugoslav successor states has resulted in various conflicts between the governments and Hungary, on the one hand, and the very Magyar minorities, on the other. Both the Hungarian public and the government have treated the Magyar minorities as a pivotal issue, particularly in the interwar period and the era since 1989. It is therefore surprising that a comprehensive history of the Magyar minorities living in the neighboring states of Hungary has not been written yet. Though various publications have focused on this problem, they rarely moved beyond the consideration of state boundaries and often limited their scope to particular limited topics. The gap was finally filled by the volume *Kisebbségi magyar közösségek a 20. században*, published in 2008 by scholars of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The book discussed here is the English translation of that Hungarian original.

The main idea of this book was to summarize the already existing but fragmented research and thus to produce a comprehensive introduction into the history of Magyar minorities outside of the borders of Hungary since their emergence in 1918. Though the authors did not intend to publish new insights, as they relied on already available scholarship, the collection of the parts into the whole definitely opens a new perspective. The book is organized into six chronological chapters, in order, the emergence of new states on the ruins of Hungary, the interwar period, World War II, the immediate postwar years, the communist era, and the post-1989 period. These chapters focus on the large Magyar communities, i.e. the Christian Magyars living on former Hungarian territories of the successor states. The last and seventh chapter introduces other, smaller Magyar communities, such as the Roma, Jews inside and outside of the Carpathian Basin, the Csángós of Romanian Moldova and the Magyars of Western Europe, North America and Australia. This chapter is also completed by analysis of the evolution of Hungarian language in mixed environments and the ethnic demography of the Carpathian Basin. The main text is followed by a detailed collection of important minority Hungarian leaders, and a comprehensive bibliography.

As already stated, the aim of *Minority Hungarian Communities* was not to provide original research but synthesize already existing knowledge. While the lack of such earlier synthesis justifies this endeavor, the absence of original research led also to several problems, one of the most important of which is the dominance of the political history approach, which in general still dominates Hungarian historical scholarship and in this regard the histories of the Magyar minorities are no exception. The volume, therefore, focuses also mostly on political and institutional issues, such as election results, political parties, political debates, declarations, etc., while issues dealing with social history appear only on the macro-level, mostly in the discussion of demographic and economic processes. This means that the political historical approach has been rarely combined with questions of everyday identity of Hungarian minorities, mechanism of assimilation, inter-ethnic relations, regional differences, local and regional aspects, such as the role of grass-root associations, sport clubs, etc., to the unfortunate neglect of the most current issues of historical and social scholarship. Nevertheless, it must be stated once again, that the aim of this book was not to present revolutionary results but to synthesize knowledge about the Magyar minorities and the fact that current scholarly methods are rarely applied by Hungarian scholars should not be blamed on the editors of the present volume.

Beside its rather outdated political approach, the other weakness of the volume under discussion is the striking inconsistency in topographical naming, usually preferring the present local names but at other times using the Hungarian names, sometimes even both. This inconsistency in naming is only partially remedied in the appendix, where the most relevant place names are listed. To illustrate the inconsistency let us refer to page 38, where a naïve reader is unlikely to understand that Minister of Slovak Affairs in the first government of Czechoslovakia, Vavro Šrobár's (1867-1950) act to move his seat to Pozsony to set up the new Slovak capital Bratislava in fact refers to the same city, whose Hungarian name is Pozsony and Slovak is Bratislava. This shortcoming is most painful exactly for those readers who are not experts in Hungarian issues and for whom this volume would be the most interesting.

In spite of its limitations *Minority Hungarian Communities in the Twentieth Century* is a very important book for both scholars, policy makers, and the wider public interested in Central Europe, especially because authors place the Magyar communities into the context of the policy of the Budapest governments, on the one hand, and that of their host states, on the other, a feature that is an important contribution of the book, as the former parallel histories of the Magyar minorities are replaced by a comparative analyzes in a single framework. Another contribution of the volume is that it also sets the Magyar minority into the European context by, in the Introduction, defining a complex taxonomy of minorities, with the aim of distinguishing the Magyar, and, in a broader sense, most of the Central European minorities from the immigrant communities in Western Europe. Furthermore, the discussed book undermines the narrative often employed both by Hungarian and minority Magyar intellectuals in which they present the “suffering” of Hungarians as historically unique. This is achieved by focus on the European context in the introduction to some historical chapters, which makes the Magyar minorities to be understood in their *Zeitgeist*. Ultimately, then, *Minority Hungarian Communities in the Twentieth Century* replaces the propaganda materials and propaganda-driven scholarship previously published by all the involved players in endless numbers.