

Bálint Varga, *The Monumental Nation: Magyar Nationalism and Symbolic Politics in Fin-de-siècle Hungary*, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2016, 286 pp., ill., tables, glossary, a map, indexes; series: Austrian and Habsburg Studies, 20

This rather short book by a young Hungarian historian is an excellent study in politics of history. With a very short time span (end of nineteenth/beginning of twentieth century) and limited territory (five specified localities) covered, the study brings to foreground a series of important phenomena, some of them astonishingly topical today. These include nationalism, the powerfulness of national and religious symbols, ethnic identities, backwardness and modernisation, and collective memory. It is with real pleasure that this wise and witty book reads: its vivid and ironical style is in contrast with the monumental subject of the story recounted.

Composed of three sections preceded by a brief introduction, the book deals with the circumstances of unveiling a series of monuments commemorating the ne-thousand years' anniversary of the 'land-taking' (Hun.: *honfoglalás*) – the date which marks the arrival of the Magyars in the Hungarian Lowland in the late ninth century. The project was initiated by the Romanticist historian Kálmán Thaly. This tireless editor of modern-age sources, some of which he forged in his own hand, managed to persuade the Government that the date should be celebrated by means of lasting signs of memory. The date was actually conventional, as no exact moment in the history had been determined: due to delayed preparatory work, the year 1896 was finally agreed upon. This is how the 'statuomania' entered Hungary, in a big way – a phenomenon that had previously developed in the west of Europe, mainly in Germany. Its local, Hungarian specificity is the central subject of Bálint Varga's book.

The first (and the shortest) section makes us concisely acquainted with the home policies pursued by Hungary after the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise. Triumphalism, an attitude appearing among the country's political elite at the time, seemed to have been well grounded then. The *Kulturkampf* waged against the Catholic Church after the Prussian model led to a series of successful events: civilian marriage was introduced in 1895, and the State took over the keeping of registers of births, deaths and marriages. Jews as well as the unbelieving gained rights equal to those enjoyed by the Catholics and the Protestants. The movements developing from within, such as socialists and non-Magyar ethnicities, posed no threat to the ruling national liberals. Hungary's international position was sound.

The millennium monuments were meant to express the strength which the Hungarian state emanated, and represent the Hungarian state doctrine to the other countries and to its own citizens. As far as the latter were concerned, the locations selected for the monuments were of key importance. The second

section discusses this particular aspect. Only two of the seven were to be erected on the ethnically Magyar territory: in the vicinity of the Pannonhalma Abbey and in Pusztaszer, between Szeged and Keckemét. The other ones towered above localities populated mostly by non-Magyar people, some of whom were rather critical about the state's policies. Two monuments were built in what is today Slovakia, on the Devín (Hun.: Dévény; Ger.: Theben) hill near Bratislava (then called Pozsony), amidst the ruins of a Great Moravian castle, and in Nitra, a town that was dominated by Catholic Church institutions. A monument twin to that of Devín, showing a vigilant warrior holding a sword in his hand pulled down, was erected on a hill outside Brassó (Rom.: Braşov; Ger.: Kronstadt), the city then populated mainly by Transylvanian Saxons and Romanians. Mukačevo (bearing the name Munkács at the time) had an even lesser number of Magyars: dominant in the locality were the Rusnaks and orthodox Jews who consistently disregarded any secular authority. The last of the millenary commemorative epitomes became a tourist attraction of Zemun (Hun.: Zimony; Ger.: Semlin) – a district of Belgrade today, then located within the autonomous Croatia. Such a selection of the places where the symbols of Hungarian domination were erected doubtlessly attested to a from-above character of the millennium commemoration project. The monuments were funded by the central authorities, and the local communities were mostly told to accept them erected in their area. The grassroots initiatives, such as the postulate put forth by the Benedictines of Pannonhalma to commemorate also their first abbot, named Astrik, on the occasion of the millenary anniversary, were rejected. The locations chosen on advice of Thaly were no less telling. Save for Zemun, they were situated outside the cities, preferably on the hill towering above the town, so that everybody could see it clearly that the monuments were not meant to become objects of some local cult but epitomised the power and authority stretching across the country. In Pannonhalma, a *via dolorosa* had to be dismantled to enable the erection; in Devín and Mukačevo the ruins of the local castles were fractured, whereas the Pusztaszer monument was erected in the midst of a void. It called for taking a more or less long trip to see most of these monuments from close-up. The message behind the millennium and the majesty of the state was explained in the document that was walled in each of the monument's foundations together with the cornerstone "thou shalt stand as long as the homeland stands."

The thus defined character of the land-taking monuments impressed a clear mark on how they were perceived. This problem is discussed in the third section, which opens with a description of the circumstances of the unveiling of the monuments, which in many of the cases was the first occasion ever to more clearly mark the Magyar presence in an ethnically alien environment. Yet, controversies did appear. In Zemun and Braşov, an international embitterment occurred. Protests against Budapest's aggressive symbolic politics appeared in Bucharest, Belgrade, and Zagreb. Some of the unveiling ceremonies were

boycotted; the press was getting outraged by ‘scandals’ such as the Romanian schoolgirls pinning a ribbon on the ceremonial day onto a cat, rather than wearing it themselves. Where the ethnic conflict did not involve animals, the ceremony influenced the local politics, accelerating a polarisation into less or more nationalistic camps among representatives of non-Magyar nations, or caused that state investments in the local economies could, apparently legitimately, be expected. From the town-hall’s standpoint, the symbolic dictate of the capital city also provoked the locals to think in terms of potential benefits for their own town.

In spite of the exacerbations, the celebrations were mostly peaceful, although the participating public rarely expressed their spontaneous enthusiasm. The attendees, predominantly school students, were brought or driven to the site rather than encouraged to spontaneously participate. Their quite lukewarm reception of the millenary agenda was partly caused by the appearance of the monuments and the ideological programme behind them. The Magyar symbols – Árpád, Magyar warriors, and the *turul* birds – were predominant, whereas no symbols were featured with which the non-Magyar people could have identified themselves. The social programme related to the monuments was limited and consequently, so was their social influence. The lower classes could find in their symbolism nothing to identify with. The celebration was clearly about a gift offered by the (male exponents of) the Magyar middle class to themselves (pp. 207, 234). Mukačevó seems to have been an interesting exception to the rule: the local Rusnak elite cherished the myth of a thousand years of brotherhood relationship with the Magyars. The millennium celebration offered a development opportunity for the otherwise backwater town immersed in economic and civilisational inanition.

The book’s most important part consists of the last chapters which deal with the practical questions related to the designing, construction and maintenance of the monuments and how they actually functioned in the public space. The author skilfully imparts the details concerning organisational and artistic problems that had to be tackled in respect of the prestigious project. An unexpected side effect is also pointed out: the Magyar monuments became an incentive for several local communities to erect their own monuments, often with a polemic ideological purport. The German townsmen of Pressburg (so was Bratislava called in German) counteracted the Devín warrior with a monument in honour of Empress Maria Theresa. Their Kronstadt compatriots responded to the provocation by erecting a statue of Johannes Honterus, the religious reformer. The Benedictine Friars of Pannonhalma finally founded an obelisk in homage of Abbot Astrik by themselves. Even more spectacular responses occurred locally. The Romanians blew up the monument in Braşov; the other statues were demolished during and just after the First World War, with the new owners ruthlessly removing the traces of the Hungarian rule. Two of the monuments have survived in a good condition. Initially rather rarely

visited, the God-forsaken locality of Pusztaszer became a popular destination for tourists. The millennium tower of Zemun has become a landmark of Belgrade.

Varga's study tells the story in an approachable way. The addenda such as the multilingual glossary of geographic names and Hungarian census data concerning the localities described in the book are most valuable and helpful to the reader. The censuses that sought to establish the language spoken and religion professed by the local communities have often been criticised as fundamentally false. The author's own view in this respect is much more moderate, but it does not have to be shared (the undersigned would personally be more sceptical about the issue). These data are certainly the only ones of the sort and thus are 'necessarily the best'; even if not corresponding with the reality, they at least should enable to grasp certain demographic regularities for a longer period of time.

The study is based on a rich literature, including Romanian, Yugoslavian (Serbian and Croatian), Slovakian, and German studies. The author is excellently versed in the problems of memory and memorisation in the European context. His studies focused on the individual millennium monuments are based on a broad query across, probably, all and any archive that could have been expected to contain the relevant material. The state archives of Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine have been searched, along with regional and church annals and files. The query is complemented by an impressive list of press articles written around 1896. Given the multilingual sources used, the fact that the errors occurring in the spelling of personal and other names are really rare calls for appreciation.

The advantages and strong points of the Varga book are numerous: it is well documented, smartly written, and pleasant to read. All this makes one ponder to what extent this fascinating case study in Hungarian symbolic politics informs the way we perceive the history of pre-Trianon Hungary. The answer must be imposing: in spite of the subject-matter, narrow as it is in itself, Varga has enriched the dominant picture of Hungarian home politics (with respect to the nationalities, in the first place) with the local dimensions, which rarely occurs there. In his concept, apart from the state that (super) imposes the language, culture and interpretation of history to its nation, there are local actors entering into bargaining with the state. The point here is not about merely reversing a top-down perspective into a bottom-up one. The history of the millenary monuments shows that symbolic politics was perpetrated by numerous actors in a variety of fields. The resistance offered to the narratives imposed by Budapest – and to the complex of actions constituting the Magyarisation policy – was not the only option. Local communities sometimes tended to develop their own politics of memory, competitive but not antagonistic against the one pursued by the central agents. The specificity of the ultraconservative Jewish community of Mukačevo created

an instance of refusal to participate in any state-managed affair. On the other hand, Budapest's initiatives and doings oftentimes lacked consistency and clout. Moreover, they also suffered from all the illnesses of a country that works its way up: paralysis and organisational chaos, susceptibility to corruption, and incompetence across the levels of authority. All these aspects render the image of Hungary in the late nineteenth century even more complex, but thus certainly richer and more interesting.

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