

Citation style

Halink, Simon: review of: Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of "National Character". A Study in Interwar East European Thought*, London, New York: Routledge, 2012, in: *Hungarian Historical Review*, 2013, 3, p. 645-649, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1189729416, downloaded from recensio.net

First published:

[http://www.hunghist.org/images/volumes/Volume\\_2\\_Issue\\_3/B...](http://www.hunghist.org/images/volumes/Volume_2_Issue_3/B...)



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

first identify the discourses which set as their objective the termination of the persistence of the Communist past and only then examine whether they have become resources for one political side or the other.

Since the book did not set out to historically examine how post-Communist discourses have shaped relations with the past, it should not be taken to task for not doing so. Nonetheless, how the political current known as “new anti-Communism” rose to prevalence in the region, how completion of the revolution has become a right-wing program, and what political forces were competing in the post-1989 period are important questions. Although Mark does take into account the contest between the continental memory traditions of East and West, he does not deal with their interactions or with the complex effect by which the Holocaust memory has become the model for the representation of Communism. I think this may give us an answer to why historical catastrophes, cultural trauma,<sup>4</sup> victim rivalry<sup>5</sup> and personal witness<sup>6</sup> have become the primary factors of European memory politics,<sup>7</sup> or in other words, why the “post-Communist totalitarian language of ‘victim’, ‘collaborator’ and ‘resister’” (p.xxviii) have risen to prevalence.

*Translated by Alan Campbell*

Máté Zombory

The Politics of “National Character”: A Study in Interwar East European Thought. (Routledge Studies in Comparative Political Thought). By Balázs Trencsényi. London–New York: Routledge, 2012. 227 pp.

In his most recent study on the history of national characterology in Eastern Europe, Balázs Trencsényi provides the reader with an in-depth and comparative analysis of intellectual discourses on national specificity in Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria respectively. This highly erudite study is published in Routledge’s series of “Studies in Comparative Political Thought,” which aims to “change the landscape of political theory by encouraging deeper comparative reflection on the structure and character of the discipline and to arrive at a richer understanding of the nature of the political” (p.II). It is in this ambitious spirit that the book is written, and it is the author’s background in philosophy that lends the study an impressive level of creative intellectual interdisciplinarity. Trencsényi, Associate Professor of history at the Central European University, has written extensively on the topic of modernity and identity discourses in East European political thought and belongs to a very exclusive category of scholars intellectually equipped to undertake a comparative study of three countries, modulating virtuously between the national case studies and covering an exhaustive range of intellectual activity in all of them.

The author’s main objective is to demonstrate the development of discourses of national specificity and national character in the interwar period, in relation to the advent of radical nationalism and transforming notions of historicity and temporality. Seemingly antagonistic concepts such as modernism and anti-modernism, autochthonism and Westernisation, constitute the conceptual framework for the analysis of the divergent discourses on national specificity in the three countries. In his approach to the complex subject of national characterology, Trencsényi is inspired by Carl Schmitt’s concept of ‘political romanticism’ and Armin Mohler’s idea of ‘conservative revolution’, originally referring to the cultural and political currents in post-World War I Germany. Both of these concepts accommodate the portrayal of the long-term evolution of identity discourses, and connect them to intellectual developments preceding the interwar period. Taking into account the influence of older currents, like Romanticism’s role in the disconnection of national institutions and national identity, or Nietzschean justifications of collective egotism, the character of the

4 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

5 Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes: Génocide, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

6 Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

7 See Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Jeffrey C. Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 5–85.

interwar discourse is determined by the unprecedented association of national character with the problem of political modernity. Traditional linear conceptions of history were in many cases replaced with a new cyclicality, linking the realization of the primordial national to modernism as much as to anti-modernism, and complicating historicism's traditional call to restore some glorious past. The dehistoricization of national character and changing attitudes towards time itself are recurring themes in the book and are discussed with considerable profundity.

After having introduced these general themes in the introductory chapter, Trencsényi points out that, even though they may all have played an important part in the countries under scrutiny, the three local discourses are not in the least identical. Initially, the author had planned to include only two case studies in his comparative analysis, but he decided to include Bulgaria as well in order to accentuate the differences and similarities between national discourses in Eastern Europe. Although the book focuses primarily on developments in the interwar period, the case studies are embedded in their historical contexts, and each chapter introduces the reader to the early modern and (especially) nineteenth-century debates on national characterology as well. This is important, since many of the interwar debates on the topic of national identity refer back to these earlier discourses.

The first case study is Romania, which consisted of the Old Kingdom of Romania and Transylvania prior to 1918. In his investigation of the historical roots of Romanian characterology, Trencsényi points out that the advent of political journalism, a lively pamphlet culture, and a new public sphere in the 1830s and 40s revolutionized the debate on Romanian identity, divided between revolutionary and evolutionary thinkers. Especially in the wake of the national-liberal revolutions of 1848, the question of whether the Romanians should follow foreign examples (as proposed by Mihail Kogălniceanu) or, instead, focus on their own autochthonous culture became a pressing one. A new phase in the debate occurred in 1860, when the *Junimist* movement, championed by Titu Maiorescu and inspired by German philosophy and Romanticism, challenged the dominant narrative of Romania's undefiled Roman origins. The *Junimists* propagated an unprecedented new version of Romanian history, in which they accentuated the evolution and organicity of the people, while at the same time criticizing modernity and its detrimental effect on the national character. This organic conception of national identity radicalized towards the end of the nineteenth century and gave shape to A. D. Xenopol's Romanian adaptation of *Völkerverpsychologie* and the idea that a people without a history was necessarily

a people without character (D. D. Drăghicescu). Through the autochtonists, who sought to reconcile political modernism with traditional and rural culture, the Romanian self-image had become a very ethnically orientated one by the early twentieth century. This trend radicalized in the interwar period, especially in the works of those considered part of the politically divergent *young generation*. Trencsényi traces the intellectual career of influential thinkers like Emil Cioran and Mircea Eliade and highlights their contributions to what he refers to as the 'a-historical turn' in Romanian national thought. To Eliade, myth and symbol, not history, became the primary denominators of national identity. A nation had to transcend its own history and aspire to universality. It was this paradoxical blend of nationalism and universalism, characteristic of the interwar period, that contributed to the emergence of a Romanian brand of Fascism.

In the next chapter, Hungary is subjected to a similar discourse analysis. After having traced the concept of Hungary back to a multi-ethnic, pre-modern nobility, Trencsényi outlines the relationship between these earlier ideas and nineteenth-century debates on national character. The Hungarian intelligentsia, more influenced by Herderian philosophy than the Romanians, developed (especially from the 1860s onwards) a strongly ethno-cultural sense of identity, which is interesting in a country that eventually consisted of over fifty percent non-Hungarians. Attempts to Magyarize an ethnically mixed population and create a national school of philosophy based on national characteristics balanced between reason and sentiment (Gusztáv Szontagh) are scrutinized and presented in their relation to opposing intellectual camps. Many of the main themes resemble those from the previous chapter on Romania, e.g. the discussions on the importation of foreign culture (which those connected to the periodical *Szép Szó* applauded), and the ambivalent relationship between political progress and cultural specificity. Interestingly, the Hungarian discourse of the interwar period resembled the Romanian one in that the nation became a spiritual category (Bálint Hóman), rather than a character based on national history, and that the political ideas of the new generation were so amorphous and ambivalent that they formed the intellectual breeding ground for later generations of fascists and communists alike. A typically Hungarian feature is the Asian, nomadic component of the interwar debate. The Hungarians differed from the rest of Europe, since they regarded themselves as descendants of a wandering steppe people which embodied the 'soul of Asia', rather than that of the West. Consequently, Sándor Karácsony could argue that national characteristics typically considered vices in a European context were actually virtues from the oriental perspective

and fundamental constituents of the Hungarian soul. Amidst this myriad of competing and overlapping models of identification and ‘alternative histories’, it is remarkable that the author hardly mentions the Habsburg legacy at all. Did the Austro-Hungarian past leave no traces in post-1918 Hungarian characterology? Furthermore, the Finno-Ugric connection, which at times was rather unpopular in Hungary but which had a major effect on ideas about the origins of the Hungarians, is entirely discarded.

The last case study, Bulgaria, is the only Slavic nation in Trencsényi’s comparative study. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, the protochronistic idea that Slavs were the original progenitors of European civilisation played a significant part in the Bulgarian identity-discourse, arguably in part to compensate for the very narrow historical and institutional foundation of modern Bulgarian identity. One of the primary markers of this discourse was a sense of ‘inbetweenness’ and belatedness, of being caught between ‘not anymore’ and ‘not yet’. By tying the Bulgarian nation to the former greatness of the Slavs and even to that of the Indo-Europeans, the ancient cultures responsible for the cultural and political oppression of Bulgaria (Byzantine Greece and the Turks), as well as Western civilisation (e.g. ancient Gaul), could be presented as being indebted to and having originated from the Bulgarians’ mythical ancestors. These images of prehistoric greatness notwithstanding, many Bulgarian intellectuals came to the agonizing conclusion that modern Bulgarians were barbarians, and that the Turks, who functioned as the ‘significant others’ with which the Bulgarians contrasted themselves, were to blame for this. In order to achieve national emancipation, Bulgarians have looked to foreign examples like Germany and even Japan, and to a more authentic pagan past, before Byzantine Christianity had defiled the free and sensitive national spirit. Inspired by Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, Bulgarian intellectuals like Pencho P. Slaveykov envisioned a pagan resurrection, a messianic return to primordial Bulgarianness. After 1918, in the wake of the traumatic Second Balkan War, the Bulgarian brand of national psychology, *narodnopsibologia*, became an important factor in the formulation of Bulgarian identity. Throughout the interwar period, the lack of historical continuity posed a serious problem for Bulgarian intellectuals, who sought their refuge in *narodnopsibologia* (Naydew Sheytanov) and glorifications of the medieval past (Peter Mutafchiev).

In the final chapter, the author offers an outline of the “common features and factors of divergence” in his comparative study, and concludes that, although the developments in all three countries are in many respects similar, the regional

character of the three discourses should not be downplayed; they all had to “cook with local ingredients”. In all three cases, Trencsényi identifies nineteenth-century Romanticism as the starting point of the modern identity discourse, and crucial years like 1918, 1933 and 1940 as turning and breaking points in their intellectual development. In the conclusion he also provides the reader with a concise overview of the legacy of these interwar identity discourses after 1945, when some of their anti-Western tendencies found themselves strangely in line with Soviet ideology. The trauma of being considered peripheral and not fully Europeanized, at a time when Europe itself was entering a period of ideological crisis, has in many ways determined the ambivalent and antagonistic position of Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria towards the West, and has left a mark on their national self-images. The herculean task of describing, analysing, and comparing these complicated developments in three equally complex case studies makes the work necessarily a densely argued intellectual *tour de force* in which little space remains for the proper introduction and contextualisation of its many protagonists. Arguably, the book may, with its 227 pages, simply be too thin to do justice to the immense complexity of Trencsényi’s endeavour. However, to those properly introduced to the intellectual history of all three countries and Eastern Europe in general, this study constitutes an innovative and fascinating contribution to the field.

Simon Halink