

## Book Review

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Krisztina Lajosi and Andreas Stynen (eds.), *The Matica and Beyond: Cultural Associations and Nationalism in Europe*.

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In the over-theorised field of nationalism studies, recent research that has paid close empirical attention to the fine grain of the historical record has been a very welcome addition. Such studies have revealed the story of nationalism across the long nineteenth century as a profoundly uneven one, varying according to geographical location, existing power structures and the related political opportunities available for national mobilisation, competing political agendas, etc. Drawing also on an ‘imperial turn’ that revised earlier accounts of empires, especially those in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, as increasingly obsolete entities in the nineteenth century, such research has been very helpful in complicating accounts of nationalism and nation-building that the dominant ‘modernist’ paradigm had simplified. The attention to detail has helped debunk teleological narratives that conferred a certain inevitability to nationalism and the nation-state form of statal organisation, as well as a developmental paradigm centred on the struggle for emancipation, progress, and their eventual triumph.



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If the now extensive literature on national indifference has shown the limits of national mobilisation by looking at people who were not swayed by nationalist rhetoric and at the numerous and fluid modes of (self)-identification that defied fixed notions of (national) identity, the present volume reveals the complexity of nationalism while focusing on the very people for whom the nation was all-important. It does so, as Joep Leerssen emphasises in the Introduction, by drawing attention to the intricacies of the *institutional* aspects of national mobilisation, at once dependent on and having consequential ramifications into a wide array of social, cultural, and political factors. The focus of the volume on cultural associations – epitomised by the *matice* ('beehives'), a prototypical type of such organisation whose scope is shown to have overlapped (more or less) with both the area of the Habsburg Empire and a number of nationalisms associated with various Slavic groups – provides it with much-needed coherence, although this can be at times less convincing in the chapters going 'beyond' the *matica* form itself. Considering the two together is however very important, and not just for expanding the (impressive) geographical range of the volume, but also for exposing significant divergences that prompt the reader to consider the complexity, or 'vexed calibration between the translational and the situational' (p. 8) dimensions of such transnational phenomena. In other words, if the chapters dealing with *matice* point at transfer and translation of a specific institutional form from the original *Matica srpska* (Serbian beehive), those exploring the 'beyond' are rather cases of situational parallels arising in widely different political and cultural contexts.

Following an excellent first chapter authored by Zsuzsanna Varga on the Buda University Press that acted as the logistical framework for several movements of national awakening, including the original *Matica srpska*, and which provides some useful transnational context, the structure of the volume follows for the most part the title. Chapters on the various

national *matice* are grouped in its first part, while the second deals with the 'beyond', in the shape of similar (but not quite the same) cultural institutions in Western Europe and the Romanov Empire. Considering this structure, the placing of the Galician-Ruthenian Matica (Chapter 14, by Iryna Orlevych) in the second part of the volume appears a rather odd editorial choice, at least to this reader. As its name suggests, this constitutes a rather typical *matica* institution established in the Habsburg province of Galicia and 'modelled on other Slavic Maticas' (p. 319), and thus very much a translational case that seems stranded between two articles dealing with cultural associations in the Romanov Empire, a very different, and considerably more repressive political context than the Habsburg one. In turn, the glaring absence of a chapter devoted to the first such cultural association and the model for the subsequent *matice* appears regrettable, with the *Matica srpska* covered only briefly – although in very nuanced manner for such a short presentation – in a subsection of Varga's chapter on the Buda Press.

As is often the case with edited volumes, the chapters vary widely in terms of foci, level of detail provided, and the degree of critical approach to the subject at hand. The very good chapter on the Slovenian Matica by Marijan Dović and the rich and insightful analysis of the interplay of regional and territorial factors with nationalising efforts and transnational entanglements in the case of the Dalmatian/Croatian Matica by Daniel Baric are both critical of the self-referential tendencies in both the productions and the historiography of the *matice* (pp. 113-114, 123). Such a critical perspective appears to be completely lacking in the chapter on the Czech Matica by Magdaléla Pokorná, which, styled more as an essay, seems to unreflexively reproduce the self-aggrandising triumphalist narrative projected by the institution itself. A potentially very interesting chapter by Liljana Gushevska on Macedonian societies in the complex setting provided by the 'Macedonian Question' falls short of the opportunity for critical engagement with the intricacies of

competing claims to ‘Macedonia’ in the 1890s and falls back instead on essentialist tropes of national struggle (of a putative ‘Macedonian nation’ whose existence is questionable during the respective period) against ‘foreign’ (Bulgarian or Serbian) ‘propaganda’.

Such simplistic narratives can be contrasted with the exquisitely nuanced and reflexive approach of Miloš Rezník, whose excellent chapter on the Sorbian *maticas* in Lusatia and the Czech Opavian *Matices* in Austrian Silesia is the most compelling of the first part of the volume. The chapter shows in great detail the complexity of such institutions in cultural spaces much smaller than even the ‘small nations’ that the volume, following Miroslav Hroch, mostly focuses on. It also brings to the fore the ‘disunity’ engendered within the Sorbian movement ‘by linguistic, traditional, and confessional differences’ (pp. 83-84), eventually leading to the creation of a separate Lower Sorbian *Matica* (*Mašica Serbska*). The comparative perspective between the Sorbian and the Czech case, and of both with other regional (Moravian) and national (Czech) *matices* provides further nuance, drawing attention to the ‘differing forms of regionality’ (p. 82) they expressed. These were dependent on internal factors (such as the social composition of the respective movements) as well as external ones (the political opportunity structures available), while varying also according to the different influences they were exposed to. In turn, this diversity of the types of regionalisation involved is employed to draw conclusions of broader validity for the understanding of the relationship ‘between nationality (ethnicity) and territoriality (regionality) [that] can be considered as characteristic of the role of regions as a mediatory “foil” of nationality and vice versa’, and to argue that ‘it was this mediation that made the incorporation of abstract national categories into the social and cultural discourse of regional or local communities possible’ (p. 79).

The insights we can draw from Miloš Rezník’s chapter are in many ways similar to those that can be inferred from the volume as a whole,

especially when factoring in the case studies that refer to other cases of cultural associations than the *matica* type, i.e., those of ‘small’ national/regional movements in Western Europe and the Romanov Empire. As with the *matice*, we encounter intersections and entanglements between multiple reference points, from sub-national through national to supra-national ones, with the importance of the – still under-researched – pan-movements coming to the fore. Both the co-existence of these different reference points and the tensions between them help us complicate a too-straightforward narrative of nationalism where a particular territorial-cultural unit, ‘the nation’, is somewhat naturalised as either the exclusive or at the very least the most viable one. We are also exposed to the asymmetrical encounter and occasional confrontation of ‘small’ or ‘minority’ nationalisms, regionalisms, or otherwise cultural ‘-isms’ with better established, ‘majority’ nation-building projects – from the Galician case analysed by Xosé M. Núñez Seixas and Alfonso Iglesias Amorín, through the Welsh one presented in great detail by Marion Löffler, to the extraordinarily rich story of the ‘Félibrige, or the Impossible Occitan Nation’ offered by Philippe Martel.

The diversity of cases covered in the second part of the volume highlight the importance of political context in shaping the nature and activities of cultural associations. These range from the favourable one in Dutch-speaking regions, presented by Jan Rock, where the Habsburg administration established an Imperial Academy in Brussels as early as 1772; through the highly politicised context in Ireland analysed by Roisín Higgins, where such cultural associations had to grapple not only with imperial authorities but also with salient – and partly competing – nationalist political agendas; to the repressive political regime in the Romanov Empire, itself played out differentially in the Baltic provinces explored by Jörg Hackmann and the Tatar cultural and educational organisations and charities examined by Diliara M. Usmanova. Not only is there a striking chronological difference of more than a century

between the beginnings of such cultural mobilisation in the Habsburg Netherlands and the two cases in the Romanov Empire, but the cases show how the divergent political contexts responsible for this difference also influenced decisively the forms such associations eventually took. The stories are further complicated by internal divisions, whether they were over the nature of the activities, with cultural activists confronting those in favour of more politically militant and even violent action in Ireland, based on competing nationalisms as in the Baltic states, where Latvian and Estonian activists vied with German ones while all of them had to engage with the Russification policies of the Romanov Empire, or between more progressive and more conservative activists in the case of Tatar organisations.

As with Miloš Rezník's contribution in the section on the *matice*, Philippe Martel's excellent chapter provides a sophisticated analysis covering all the intricacies associated with the activity of cultural associations that the volume focuses on, and it does so by exploring the microcosm of the Félibrige, the main institution promoting the attempts at an Occitan revival in nineteenth-century France. Showcasing an example of *failed* national mobilisation, Martel's chapter is exemplary in providing an illuminating comparative context spanning national movements across Europe, doubled by detailed analysis of the social composition of the Félibrige and of the effects of an uneven process of urbanisation on the geographical distribution of the movement. A transnational outlook that crosses 'national' boundaries with the discovery of the links between Occitan and Catalan confers the analysis 'spatial amplitude' rendering it 'no longer a provincial problem, but something far broader' (p. 191). A keen eye for divisions along the lines of class and for patterns of social mobility whereby many of the Occitan activists sought their recognition in the French capital rather than the 'Midi' allows accounting for the paradoxes of a national movement on behalf of an Occitan-speaking population that it failed to reach. The politics of the respective activists

are given due attention, from an initial alignment with the *Ancien Régime* (more visible though for Breton or Basque) to the diversity of political positions that could be encountered within its ranks at the end of the century, from the notions of direct democracy espoused by the Communard Louis-Xavier de Ricard to the reactionary and later far-right politics of Charles Maurras. The typical ‘ingredients’ of nation-building – ‘a proper language with a rich literary heritage, and a territory, an ancient province with long-established historical boundaries’ (p. 200) – are shown to be present in the Occitan case, but not sufficient for large-scale mobilisation, given the *presence* and strength of a not so much competing as over-arching nationalism, the majority French one, and the *absence* of a specific social dynamic that would have rendered the emerging middle class losers rather than winners of France’s economic modernisation. All of these insights provide richness and depth to our understanding of nationalism and its protean character, able to accommodate left- and right-wing politics, and to the importance of a confrontational context (or the absence thereof in the Occitan case), itself shaped by class dynamics as much as by cultural or religious differences.

Throughout the volume, despite the diversity of the cases it covers, the role of religion appears all-important, just as many of the cultural activists are revealed to be men of the cloth. The inclusion of a chapter on Tatar organisations is all the more useful along these lines, as it shows this pattern to not be limited to the different Christian denominations, but present within Islam as well. Against prevailing notions of nationalism accompanying processes of secularisation and the decline of religion (pivotal for example to Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’), this calls for renewed attention to the importance of religion, understood as a dynamic factor fusing with national mobilisation rather than a static and increasingly obsolete contestant in terms of communities’ primary allegiance. Long recognised to have

played a role in many national identities, religion is shown in this volume to be more than a cause for confrontation associated with confessional differences, with cases such as that of the Slovak *matica* analysed by Benjamin Bossaert and Dagmar Kročanová exposing how ‘the initiative of forming a literary society was taken first by the Catholics, then by the Protestants, and sometimes they worked together’ (p. 58). Such cases of inter-confessional cooperation are in need of more attention, as is the role played by clergy in the development and spread of nationalist ideas. Rather than the static image of religion as a cultural resource nationalism could draw on, or as a model for nationalism as ‘political religion’, scholars of nationalism would do well to factor in the active role it played in national mobilisation in conjunction with a process of secularisation that was highly uneven – not just geographically, but also according to social class and the urban/rural divide – and quite questionable for some spaces (e.g., nineteenth-century Eastern and South-Eastern Europe).

Another common feature that comes through from the cases covered in the volume is that of the two main aims of the *matice* and similar institutions elsewhere. Scholarly pursuits related to the ‘study of history, language (including spelling), and literature’ (p. 204) were accompanied by campaigns to spread national culture among the ‘masses’ through affordable publications, as well as to improve literacy and eventually to educate new national elites, by providing stipends to students, for example. As many of the chapters in the volume reveal, these different aims were not always in tune and their co-existence could be less than harmonious, just as the actors associated primarily with one or the other could themselves be at odds. Alongside the seemingly successful National Eisteddfod of Wales which appears to have combined both, and the many interesting hybrid institutions (literary competitions and prizes, cultural festivals), we encounter many cases where cultural activists failed to reach their intended audience, or where the dominance of scholarly pursuits hampered efforts at popularisation. In turn, this

hints at the ambivalence of nationalism itself, where projects of social emancipation coexisted, often uneasily, with the attempts to canonise a suitable high culture and national history.

The fact that most of the chapters explicitly refer to Miroslav Hroch's paradigm is salutary not only for providing an additional layer of coherence to a volume that otherwise covers a wide array of cases in very diverse settings, but also due to the attention it devotes to the social factors at play in the passage from one phase of national mobilisation to another. In a volume dealing with cultural associations, this is a useful reminder of the broader social context, acting as a (quasi)-constant corrective to 'culturalist' interpretations focusing almost exclusively on elites. The attention to ideas of 'Slavic reciprocity' and the essential role of pan-Slavism in engendering and bolstering different nationalisms provide another unifying factor, in this case limited to the chapters dealing with *matice* institutions proper. The insightful afterword by Alexei Miller places the *matice* (but not the other cultural associations covered in the volume) in yet another important context, that of imperial studies, showing how inter-imperial rivalry as much as internal transformations within empires (especially of the Habsburg after the *Ausgleich*, but also of the Romanov after 1905) influenced the trajectories of 'small' nationalisms therein. Miller answers the important question of why the *matice* 'developed primarily in the Habsburg Empire' (p. 357), which the respective chapters mostly eschewed, and the answer is yet another indication of how imperial policies could have unintended consequences that ended up undermining the imperial administration, serving 'rather to trigger nationalist mobilization than to promote reconciliation' (p. 361). It would have been interesting if the eminent imperial studies scholar that is Alexei Miller had brought his vast expertise to bear on the relationship of the cases of cultural mobilisation in Western Europe presented in the volume with their respective imperial settings. Similarly, the insight of reading the *matice*

and similar cultural associations elsewhere within the framework of centre-periphery relations is an important one, holding the promise of a history of peripheral nationalisms in Europe that would manage to bridge a still-persistent East/West divide.

To sum up, this is an important volume, rich in detail and coherent enough despite the diversity of the case studies it covers to make a valuable contribution to nationalism studies, revealing a European dimension to the emergence of cultural associations with national agendas during the long nineteenth century. An interesting read for historians, with individual contributions highlighting the complexity of what are typically seen as the prototypical institutions promoting cultural nationalism, the many meaningful insights the volume provides might be slightly under-theorised for other scholars working on nationalism. While some of the chapters themselves emphasise the mutual influences and contacts between such institutions, as well as engaging in interesting comparisons, and while the case studies are framed by excellent introductory and concluding considerations about the transnational and inter-imperial contexts in which these associations emerged, some proper conclusions are still lacking. These could have been brought out more and rendered more relevant for nationalism studies and related fields, as I believe they are. More direct editorial intervention could have been useful here, as it would have been for providing consistency within the volume, where some chapters, for example, needed better language editing. Beyond such technical considerations, the fact that both the introduction and afterword are written by guest scholars, with no general commentary offered by the two volume editors, appears as a shortcoming, despite the considerable effort that must have gone into assembling such a rich collection. The interested reader will find a lot of valuable, thoroughly researched material within the pages of this volume, as well as inspiring insights of broader validity than the respective case studies. To do so, however, she

will have to dig deep into the individual contributions, with little guidance from the volume editors; perhaps this review will be of some help toward that.

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