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Gergely Romsics. *Myth and Remembrance: The Dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in the Memoir Literature of the Austro-Hungarian Political Elite.* DeKornfeld and Helen D. Hiltabidle. East European Monographs Series. Wayne: Columbia University Press, 2006. x + 273 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-566-9.

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Memoirs and the Poetization of the Past

"This is a terrible book."[1] With these words, August Strindberg begins one of his various autobiographical memoirs, which he must have regarded as problematic because of its wrathful content and writing style. One tension of the novel derives from the narrator's insistence on telling the truth rather than presenting an interpretation of his memories. I wonder whether Gergely Romsics feels similarly about the translation of his book on the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire. Unlike Strindberg's novel, this study uses memoirs to contrast competing collective memories that influenced the depiction of personal experiences during and after the collapse of the empire. The vast selection of texts considered was written by politicians, officers, soldiers, newspaper owners and journalists, members of the high clergy and writers like the secessionist poet BÃ©la BÃ¡lazs or the 1920s popular author Cecile Tormay. Romsics's project is as ambitious as the number of sources is grand.

The book begins with a brief foreword and an introduction outlining the theoretical framework of collective memory. Romsics then considers the Old Austrians, the Hungarians and the Austro-Germans in subsequent chapters; an additional chapter devoted to the "Poetics of Memoirs" addresses prevalent metaphors in the source material. Thus, Romsics's project is interdisciplinary in its attempt to combine historical and literary analysis.

Romsics has based his study on Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory (1925) and draws his insights on the fictional qualities of the narratives from Paul Ricoeur's concept of memory as "narrative-like" experience (p. 6). Halbwachs asserts that all memory is integrated in discursive patterns and communicates with other memories as well as the opinions and ideas of social circles at a particular time and place.[2] Romsics's overall purpose is to present memoirs as samples of competing collective memories and to "contribute to the study of mentalities, more specifically to the study of ideological and value canons" (p. 167). He convincingly illustrates the existence of three competing collective memories in the period from 1918 to the 1940s that attempt to explain the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire through the production of personal memoirs. Romsics organizes his source material around those three ideologies and identifies them with the following groups of writers: Old Aus-

trians, Hungarians and Austro-Germans. Whether or not a text belongs to a particular group does not depend on the author's ethnic background, but on the political view that he expresses in his memoir.[3] Romsics claims that Old Austrian texts present a nostalgic longing for the past and writers in this group seek to disconnect themselves from the post-Empire present in which they are writing. In contrast, the Austro-Germans see the empire's dissolution as the condition for the new present with which they identify. Finally, Hungarians focus on Hungary rather than on the empire and do not blame Austrians for the changed political situation after the Great War. Rather, they consider present conditions depending on the political spectrum to which they belong (either they approve of the communist leadership or vehemently reject it). Romsics places the discussion of Hungarians in between his analyses of the Old Austrians and Austro-Germans to foreground the contrast between the two Austrian groups of writers.

Yet, the literary analysis is added like an afterthought to the historical study of the memoirs and reads more like an introduction to the rhetorical figure of metaphor than as an insightful addition to specific historical texts. Furthermore, Romsics's insistence upon the memoirs' fictional dimension (pp. 6, 39ff.) does not elucidate the matter of whether he regards his sources as reliable testimonies that merely employ different points of views or as (fictional) writing projects that employ a historical background. A discussion of metaphors within each historical chapter would have been more adjuvant than the observation that the writers used metaphors at all. Furthermore, Romsics's analysis of two successive generations of writers vanishes within this structure, even though the Old Austrians presumably form the older generation in comparison to the Austro-Germans. The historian neither explicitly confirms this notion nor does he interpret the groups' different ideas with generationality. His only reference to "generation" as a taxonomic category occurs in the Hungarian context. Here he notes that memoirs from the 1930s and 1940s had a "more critical tone" (p. 136) than those written shortly after 1918.

Another key term in Romsics's analysis is identity, which he attaches to the three ideological categories outlined above. Romsics claims that Old Austrians lost their identity with the fall of the empire, while Hungarians and Austro-Germans did not have to redefine themselves. This assertion, however, leads to the question of whether the identity of Old Austrians was really lost or just redefined, as Romsics's label "Old Austrian" already indicates. Here in particular a more thorough investigation of the two generations to explain the different "experiences" (or rather, historic events experienced) among Old Austrians and Austro-Germans would have strengthened his usage of the term, "identity." According to Romsics, the Hungarians did not deal with the empire and instead discussed the consequences of its dissolution for Hungary. Their identity was not disrupted and their narratives separated the collapse of the empire from the "disintegration of the country" (p. 63). Interestingly enough, Romsics detects a desire for power only in the Hungarian case; he claims that both the political left and right sought to become "Verwalter des Wortes" (p. 90), or masters of the official historical narrative. Thus, their memoirs form a convincing counterpoint to the Austrian texts, which negotiate the past and present in terms of a traumatic split and loss of identity or a necessary continuation and strengthening of (Austro-German) identity.

The study that results from this rhetorical structure, unfortunately, is often confusing. To begin with, Romsics's text selection is not well explained. Did he use archival manuscripts in addition to published sources? Neither the text nor the appendix provides sufficient clarification, and the one footnote addressing the issue (n. 39 in the introduction, p.11) only lists a reference that (presumably) analyzes unpublished memoirs by soldiers. Furthermore, Romsics does not address the intended audience of the published texts. He claims to present a generational memory by using sources from two successive generations (p. 5), but fails to flesh out the extent to which memoirs from "the tense conditions of the 1930s and 1940s" (p. 136) correspond to those collective memories that influenced individual writings from the early 1920s. Finally, Romsics fails to include a historical context for the memoirs, which narrows the usefulness of his book to historians already familiar with events that occurred in the Austrian Empire and during World War I.

Despite the topical contributions that this disquisition may be able to make, moreover, it suffers from muddled language, style and structure. Spelling mistakes are frequent, grammatical errors abound, tenses shift randomly within paragraphs and the pronoun "this" is hardly ever used with a noun. More than once the reader finds herself wondering why a paragraph serves to contradict its own topic sentence. The text becomes especially challenging when Romsics inverts terms within paragraphs and does not provide an interpretation of individual examples from his sources. A longer excerpt may serve to illustrate this point:

"*All authors of the right* are in agreement that during the war the army and the people of the Monarchy gave evidence of admirable steadfastness under extremely difficult conditions. Several authors mention the strength derived from a superior morality that came from the knowledge that 'the war was initiated by those who, years before the Sarajevo outrage, divided up Hungary's skin and flesh amongst them.' This is obviously contrary to BÃ¶hm's view. According to the popular and representative author of the post-1920 era, Cecile Tormay, it was precisely this moral superiority that made the people, especially soldiers, 'perform miracles' and allowed in spite of all difficulties 'hope to live and decency to live.' Writing about the moral posture and the actions of the leadership of the Monarchy during the war, SzterÃ©nyi emphasized the 'totally different spirit that characterized the peace discussions in the East, compared to Versailles, St. Germain and Trianon.' Klein is once more practically the only one who discusses the relationship between the events during the war with the pre-1914 problems" (p. 61, emphasis added).

"Superior morality" accidentally slips into (and is equaled with) "moral superiority" and becomes mere "moral posture" when Romsics quotes JÃ³zsef SzterÃ©nyi. But Romsics offers no explanation of what this liberal politician may have meant by the term "different spirit." Similarly, even though BÃ¶hm is introduced as a social democrat (and thus as a leftist) earlier in the text, here he is purported to have *right-wing* opinions. The paragraph ends with ÃdÃ¶n Klein's organization of his memoir, which has nothing to do with the morality issue raised previously. This quote may suffice to illustrate that the poor structure of the book as a whole pervades individual paragraphs. The decision to include individual biographies of the writers in the appendix rather than the body of the text contributes further to the reader's disorientation, especially when–as illustrated above–liberals, leftists and conservatives are all mentioned in a passage on right-wing opinions. Finally, an explanation of some concepts (such as the "Szeged idea") would have been helpful. Indeed, more editorial care in general would have been beneficial for this volume.

The decision to study a distinct period of time through personal memoirs raises questions about the relationship between memory and memoir, which Romsics attempts to address through the attribute "fictional" as a final category of his study. The issue recalls Strindberg's dilemma of telling the truth within a fictional work. Are memoirs fictions or reliable accounts of the past? After all, the presented sources seek to preserve individual ideas and memories of a historical process in addition to the "official" version. Here, Foucault's idea of "countermemory" (which corresponds to Bourdieu's notion of "worlds in reverse") could have been used instead of "fiction."[4] Furthermore, the glimpse into the memoirs reminded me of Alessandro Portelli's notion of "memory as an alternative," which he developed in the context of oral history.[5] Portelli claims that memory accompanies change but simultaneously resists it and thus produces alternatives to the archival history of events. Romsics offers three versions of history in his book that are all valid as they represent individual and collective experiences. According to him, the historian's task is to "distance history and not to bring it closer" (p. vii), by which he means to understand the memoirs as fictional texts that are nonetheless influenced by the historic structures of the time of their production. An analysis of the memoirs as (competing) alternative histories would have resulted in a more complex debate of the presented ideologies, however, because reducing the memoirs to mere fictions devalues their historical validity to a certain extent. Thus, the method of how Romsics includes the concept of fiction undermines his project of illustrating how collective memories shape individual perceptions of the past–and vice versa.

Romsics's book is extremely difficult to follow and the pleasure of learning about collective memories at the end of the Habsburg Empire is too often obstructed by the shifting arguments and the challenging literary style. While Romsics clearly shows the different approaches to the past and the different methods with which Old Austrians blamed Hungarians for the dissolution of the empire, he does not bring such discourses into full dialogue with each other. The advantage of this "lack" is that the book manages to present the ways in which various contrasting memories were produced simultaneously. Thus, the book is not terrible in a Strindbergian sense. Yet, while the number of sources is impressive, the literary reading does not achieve a real historical analysis. Romsics's study is a fine example of the rule that interdisciplinary projects work best if they are well grounded in their respective disciplines. Otherwise, the categories of one field might involuntarily undermine the other, which is a terrible result for the project as a whole. Unfortunately, such a reversal occurs in Romsics's book.

Notes

[1]. August Strindberg, *A Madman's Defense*, trans. Evert Sprinchorn (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 3.

[2]. Bridget Fowler, "Collective Memory and Forgetting: Components for a Study of Obituaries," *Theory, Culture and Society* 22 (2005): pp. 53-72; p. 55.

[3]. Romsics mentions only one woman writer, Cecile Tormay, as engaging in the debates on the state of the post-Empire Hungary (p. 61).

[4]. Fowler, "Collective Memory," p. 57.

[5]. Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 70.