



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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Memoir as Collective Text, or Be Careful with Your Words

Historical memory and memory culture have attracted the attention of historians for some time, and some interesting research on these topics has been done in the study of the former Habsburg lands.[1] However, a broader or comparative study of the memories concerning the Habsburg monarchy's dissolution, a paramount event in twentieth-century Central and Eastern European history, was not readily available until recently. Gergely Romsics's painstakingly researched and tightly written book, *Myth and Remembrance*, first published in Hungary in 2004 and now made available in English translation, impressively addresses this void with a rigorous and illuminating deployment of discursive analysis.

In this study of the mentality of the former Austro-Hungarian political elite, Romsics sets out to survey what they thought about both the dissolution of the monarchy and its consequences in the interwar years. The central question is whether there were discernable groupings in memoir writing; and by implication, whether there were meaning-endowing communities of memory in post-1918 Austria and Hungary. Focusing on literary and linguistic characteristics of individual texts, the

author constructs "fictitious master narratives" that enable him to identify and dissect emplotment and selection strategies in memoir writing. This method shows how memoirs shared canonical elements and lexicons and, therefore, establishes the existence of communities of memory (p. 139).

The author selects one hundred memoirs for examination and divides their authors into three groups: Old Austrians, who still identified with the supranational monarchy during the interwar period (32 memoirs); and Hungarians and Austro-Germans whose primary political identities were with their post-1918 Hungarian or German-Austrian political communities (46 and 22 memoirs respectively). The construction of each group's fictitious master narrative and the attendant discussions form the book's core chapters (2 to 4).

Among the distinguishing characteristics of Old Austrian memoirs (discussed in chapter 2) were the recounting of their authors' experience of the "almost total loss of identity," a repeated emphasis on the irretrievability of the past, a general tragic-elegiac narrative mode, and a devout and ritualized portrayal of Francis Joseph that

functioned as a metonym for the monarchy. These combined characteristics mythologized the immediate past and transformed it into a kind of cultural memory. Endowed with moral authority by this transformation, the mythologized past justified Old Austrians' past-oriented identity and underpinned their diagnoses of the postwar world's ills. Old Austrians emphasized different factors that contributed to the dissolution. But their narratives about the days before and during the dissolution left the "axiom of loss and irretrievability untouched" (pp. 168-169). Their opinions differed from one another regarding Archduke Francis Ferdinand or Emperor Charles, or about the role Hungary and the homefront played in the collapse of the monarchy. But overall "[t]he texts tend to be more similar to each other than could be expected judging by the heterogeneity of the authors' experiences" (p. 172).

In chapter 3 Romsics teases out two common characteristics from the Hungarian elite's memoirs: that their views were "Hungarocentric" (p. 169); and that their dissolution-memory discourses closely reflected interwar political cleavage. What most greatly mattered to Hungarian memoirists was the dissolution of historic Hungary (the Hungarian half of the monarchy), and not the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy *per se*. However, their views differed significantly on why and how the historic Hungary broke up. Two master narratives emerge in this regard: the "dominant" master narrative shared by conservative-nationalists, liberal-conservatives and extreme right-wingers; and a defiant, anti-Horthy regime, "Octobrist" narrative espoused by ex-revolutionaries of both bourgeois-radical and Social Democratic strands (pp. 51-52). The two master narratives served clear political purposes: the memoirists were competing to provide the definitive narrative of the traumatic national loss and thereby "control the memory and indirectly the sources of legitimacy in the present" (p. 90).

The two master narratives' diverging interpretations crystallized in two important figures, Istvan Tisza and Mihaly Karolyi. To pro-establishment, right-wing memoirists, Tisza symbolized the prosperous Dualist Era—the healthy, homogenous, and strong pre-1918 Hungary. Ex-revolutionaries thought otherwise. For them Tisza embodied Dualism's failure to introduce necessary reforms to solve nationality and social questions, and they believed this failure to confront structural problems was the ultimate reason for the breakup. In contrast, pro-establishment, right-wing memoirists thought that Hungary needed no structural reform. They blamed the rev-

olutionaries for the catastrophe of the Treaty of Trianon. In Karolyi they found the personification of the ills identified as reasons for the fatal errors committed at critical junctures: dilettantism, incompetence, weakness, adventurism, and a lack of nationalist-martial will. They believed that Karolyi, "the traitor," and not Bela Kun's Soviet revolutionaries had opened the floodgate, and that Karolyi bore the greatest responsibility for the dissolution of the once-strong historic Hungary.

Despite the opposing views, the two master narratives coped with the irresolvable national trauma of dissolution in the same way: mythologizing the recent past. Individual historical figures became symbols and metaphors, and mysterious imageries were invoked to represent the nation. Hungarian memoirists stubbornly emphasized the Hungarian nation's historical continuity despite the revolutions in 1918 and 1919 and the dissolution. Some radicals even constructed mystery play-like accounts whose Passion or eschatological elements symbolized the fate and the destined "resurrection" of the Hungarian nation.

Austro-German memoirists, discussed in chapter 4, were closer to their Hungarian counterparts in their tendency to link narratives about the past to current political needs. But unlike the Hungarians, all Austro-German memoirists tried to exploit the legitimating potential of the revolution and the founding days of the republic. At the same time, their memory accounts were almost "mirror images of the Old Austrian memoirs" (p. 171). Old Austrians tried to mark 1918 as the unbridgeable division of the present from the immediate past. Austro-German authors did similar marking, but their emphasis was on the post-1918 world. They separated the past from the present with an eye to the future.

There were differences among Austro-German memoirists, and Romsics again identifies divergences along interwar Austria's political fault lines. A good example concerns memoirists' different versions of the Republic's founding myth. Social Democrats prided themselves on their leadership during the revolution and in immediate postwar state-building. Christian Socials preferred to talk about "the people" as the driving force behind the new beginning. And the *Grossdeutsch* nationalists could not forget those armed border conflicts with other successor-states. Nevertheless, Austro-German memoirists constituted a more homogenous group than Hungarian memoirists because the former "all endeavor[ed] to demythicize the Monarchy, adhere to the German national program and focus on the creation of the state and

on the fight for the new country” (p. 130).

In chapter 4 Romsics also moves beyond the static and taxonomy-like analysis of the previous two. Readers finally can see remembering and forgetting in progress. As the immediate postwar consensus faded and political polarization deepened, Christian Socials, especially those of the younger generation, began to downplay their comrades’ participation in the 1918 revolution. They constructed an alternative narrative that emphasized 1923, the beginning of Ignaz Seipel’s chancellorship, as the “second (and real) founding” of the Republic (pp. 134-138). Memoirs composed after mid-1920s augmented strategic forgetting of one’s support for the revolution in 1918 with selective remembrance. They began to remember the Habsburgs’ positive legacy, and recognized in it the foundation for a new Austrian identity. This remembrance hinted at an attempt to formulate an Austrian identity that departed from the existing German cultural-political identity and its accompanying preference for *Anschluss*. This chapter, therefore, also presents a promising perspective on the old question of the emergence of a post-Habsburg Austrian identity.

The fifth chapter, “The Poetics of Memoirs,” complements the group-by-group analysis in the three previous chapters. Here, Romsics examines phrase- and sentence-level linguistic building-blocks of memory narratives in a more technical manner. The author discusses temporality, acts of naming, metaphor, and language in memoirs to determine whether “tools of fiction condition narration,” and whether “these tools are used by the authors in accordance with group norms and expectation” (p. 139). His discussion of language usage shows that memoirs were not plain accounts of personal experiences. “Rules of the narrativization” mediated the recording of the experiences, which proceeded by “relying on and adapting the narrative schemes and the canonical elements of texts originating from the discourses of [authors’] in-groups” (p. 172).

Ideology was thus present in all memory accounts. It was therefore neither possible nor practical to distinguish “ideological sections” from “personal experiences” (p. 172). This discussion not only substantiates Romsics’s claim about memoirists’ group-specific use of language, but also underlines his contention about the fictional nature of memoirs—and by implication, the same quality of textually embodied collective memory in general. The chapter is perhaps the most important methodological contribution of this book. It addresses the “secondary sphere of meaning, that of poetics and connotation” (p.

142), which historians rarely tackle head-on. And by showing that discursive analysis of collective memory can be fruitful, this chapter (and the book as a whole) also constitutes an intervention in the debate over the productivity of poststructuralism-informed historical research.

The author’s innovative method not only succeeds in achieving the goal set for the project, its close attention to lexicon and narrative elements also uncovers other significant phenomena that had so far evaded systematic examination. One of these phenomena was the prevalence of *Dolchstoss* (stab-in-the-back) discourses among interwar right-wingers of various shades in Austria and Hungary. The discourse enabled ring-wingers to identify scapegoats easily, but Romsics’s findings suggest that it may have functioned also as a rallying point within certain circles. At a minimum, *Dolchstoss* discourses could serve as a measure of political radicalization. A good example was Christian Socials’ use of this genre of discourse to distance themselves from their former coalition partner, the Social Democrats. Romsics’s work reintroduces *Dolchstoss* discourses back to the critical political vocabulary of interwar Central Europe. A thorough comparative study is still needed to determine whether this discursive genre had as much currency and effect on Austria and Hungary as it had on Weimar Germany.

The book is highly commendable for its thoroughness in textual examination. Also commendable are the appendix’s short biographies of memoirists, which provide very helpful contextual information. However, there are problematic points. Some copyediting misses (most serious: endnote disorders on pp. 21 and 88) aside, Romsics’s self-imposed limit on the whole project is an obvious problem. He presents a static picture—or as he puts it, a “still frame”—of the mentality of the interwar Austro-Hungarian political elite (p. viii). This makes his concluding triangular model unfortunately less than convincing. In this triangular model he argues that three sets of forces, “[the] potentially identity-fostering past, the author that engaged in interpreting the past, and the community of remembrance to which the author belongs,” are “in continuous interaction” (p. 175). With some notable exceptions, the aforementioned static analysis turns Romsics’s findings into frozen moments, despite his reference to “continuous interaction.”

To touch upon another questionable area, Romsics’s efforts to show how much same-group memoirs agreed with each other make one wonder whether he is implying that memory communities had (and have) a dominant

and deterministic effect on individuals. When the bulk of the book focuses persistently on the influential existence of the communities of memory, it is not easy for readers to see it otherwise. Without substantially involving both developmental processes and the material past (as opposed to discourses), the book's main body and general argument, in contrast to its conclusion, look more like a one-directional line being drawn from memory communities to individual authors.

Romsics's openness to literary and cultural theories enables him to propose an innovative approach to collective memory. But sometimes this openness is perilous. His enlistment of the concept of liminality in characterizing Old Austrians is a case in point. Liminality, as elaborated by Victor Turner, refers to a range of states of being marginal and of being "betwixt and between"—not bounded by the structured society's usual rules, conventions, roles, or functions. According to Turner, liminality is an important element of the "communitas vs. structure" dialectic, which in turn is necessary for a society to function. Turner's examples of liminal groups clearly underline this point. Old Austrians were indeed more or less outsiders, a marginal community performing certain distinct and ritualized activities. They nonetheless possessed only a limited number of the attributes that Turner identifies in "liminal entities."^[2] Furthermore, Romsics fails to show that Old Austrians had either affected anything symbolically or sociopolitically significant, or performed any important structural-cultural functions for the society at large. He even acknowledges this, writing "The discourse of the Old Austrians â had little effect on their immediate environment" (p. 49). So it is very debatable whether Romsics's labeling of Old Austrians as a "liminal group" or "liminal community" is fully warranted; and more fundamentally, it remains questionable whether this labeling yields more insights into Old Austrians' mentality. For this reader Romsics's excursion into Turnerian anthropology only makes the conclusion of a fine chapter rather disjointed, if not superfluous. One

hopes that this somewhat forced drafting of Turner reflects not the author's perception that he should prove his theoretical literacy whenever possible but rather a misstep in exploring the potentials of cultural theories.

Despite these complaints, this book is very illuminating both in its approach and in its findings. Additionally, the research design as well as its presentation is exemplarily methodical. The book deserves the attention of readers who are interested in the memory culture(s) of post-Habsburg Central Europe. Those who are interested in applying discursive analysis in studying historical memory or mentality should also see how he does it. Of course, readers interested in how the war-related experiences shaped the politics and the culture of interwar Central Europe will find some very promising leads for further research in this book. Although we can reasonably expect a more dynamic and a more complex picture of interwar memories to emerge, Romsics shows us one productive way to paint it by being careful with memoirists' words.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Maria Bucur and Nancy M. Wingfield, eds., *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2001). Memory and forgetting in shaping national and other (mainly political) collective identities is the theme of Moritz Csaky and Elena Mannova, eds., *Collective Identities in Central Europe in Modern Times* (Bratislava: Academic Electronic Press, 1999). The latest Central European scholarship is in Johannes Feichtinger et al., eds., *Schauplatz Kultur - Zentraleuropa: Transdisziplinaere Annaeherungen, Gedaechtnis-Erinnerung-Identitaet 7* (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2006).

[2]. Victor W. Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94-96. For a list of liminal entities' attributes, see pp. 102-113.

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