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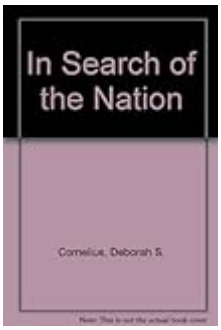

Deborah S. Cornelius. *In Search of the Nation: The New Generation of Hungarian Youth in Czechoslovakia 1925-1934.* Boulder, Colorado; New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. xiii + 413 pp. $42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-409-9.

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Seeking an Identity, Finding a Nation

During times of crisis, populations often look to the younger generation for optimism, vision, and salvation. But when the young suggest novel approaches, they frequently meet with rejection. Throttled by their narrow-minded elders, they retreat to the margins and become more radical. Deborah Cornelius' expanded dissertation tells just such a coming-of-age story. She considers *Sarlo* (Sickle), an exuberant Czechoslovak youth organization consisting of students who chose to identify themselves as Hungarian in nationality. As these students matured, argues Cornelius, so did Hungarian national identity.

In highlighting how generational differences affected ideas of nation, Cornelius nostalgically pits a progressive, freethinking *Sarlo* against the staid old Hungarian political and cultural establishments in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, all hamstrung by revisionism. *Sarlo*, claims Cornelius, made several pioneering advances that helped reconceptualize Hungarian national identity and elevate it to the primary component of individual identity. (p. 19) First, it was one of the earliest ethnic Hungarian movements to escape the intellectual strictures of irredentism, declaring that the way to alleviate the Slovak-Hungarian minority's difficulties was a cultural revival, not a redrawing of state boundaries. Second, *Sarlo* redefined *magyarsag* (Hungarian-ness, -dom, culture, or *Volk*) to encompass the "totality of Hungarians within the Hungarian cultural community" (p. 4) regardless of class, social status, religion, political affiliation, or geographic location. By espousing this inclusive and primarily cultural concept of nationality, *Sarlo* was able to offer a practical framework for discussion of Hungarian minority rights.

Cornelius' book is organized chronologically, beginning with a variety of biographical sketches and childhood anecdotes from the lives of future *Sarlo* leaders and activists. She highlights their diverse social and economic backgrounds and argues that, prior to the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, a sense of Hungarianness was merely geographic and not the dominant part of individual identity.

Chapter two declares that, for the cohort of Hungarian youth Cornelius studies, born in the *Felvidek* (Highlands or Uplands) between 1904 and 1910, national identity became the key aspect of personal identity. Those

who were slightly older and had fought in the war largely fled to Hungary and adopted the outlook of their fathers: that *magyarsag* was the "organic unity...of the Crown of St. Stephen." (p. 59) Those who were younger had no clear recollection of Habsburg Hungary and thus either assimilated to the majority Czechoslovak culture and/or adopted other non-national identities as their primary identities. Again utilizing personal accounts, Cornelius develops one of her main points: identities are selected, not genetically assigned. Chauvinistic Hungarians can easily become "equally chauvinistic Czech[s]" after 1918 because "it's bread that's important." (p. 92)

Chapters three through five are the meat of the book, detailing the origins of *Sarlo* in the Slovak-Hungarian scouting movement, the development of the St. George Senior Scout Circles, the Circles' eventual evolution into *Sarlo*, and finally *Sarlo*'s separation from the scouting movement. In the absence of all other cultural organizations, Slovak-Hungarian scouting became the forum for imagining a new *magyarsag*. The constraints Czechoslovak authorities placed upon the Scouts required that the Scouts' version of Hungarian identity be cultural, not political. Scouting, in turn, fostered a populist or *nepi* notion of national identity, imparted a "sense of mission" (p. 105) that characterized the later *Sarlo* movement, and removed the impediments of class and status that had previously limited the thinking and organization of Hungarian youth groups. Cornelius traces the roots of Hungarian populist sociography to Slovak-Hungarian scouting and exposes the generational chasms that divided the ethnic Hungarian community in Slovakia.

The St. George Senior Scout Circles arose first as a Hungarian student organization at the university in Prague, but soon spread to Brno and Bratislava. Modeled after the German *Wandervoegel* movement and heavily influenced by Hungarian populist literature, the Circles saw the rural peasantry and working classes as the core of Hungarian identity. The Circles launched the first wave of Scout village exploration in the Slovak countryside in 1927 with the dual goals of bringing modern knowledge to the villages and introducing the Scouts to real Hungarian folk culture. In 1928, when *Sarlo* emerged from the Circles, it adopted a worldview that envisioned Hungarian unity rooted in democracy and the rediscovery of village culture. It attracted the attention of populists and student organizations in Hungary and Transylvania. Its demographic work was a major impetus for the village exploration movement that later flourished in Hungary. Over time, *Sarlo*'s mission became more radical. By 1931, these summer expeditions had matured into internationally recognized, Marxist-tinged endeavors designed to uncover destitution and Czech bourgeois exploitation.

As the goal of promoting Hungarian cultural unity was displaced by the aim of revealing misery, *Sarlo* turned towards Socialism and Communism. This served to alienate the political elites in both Hungary and Czechoslovakia, ultimately leading to *Sarlo*'s destruction in 1934. Its first setback was in 1929, when Czechoslovak authorities limited its village exploration, forcing *Sarlo* to turn its gaze towards the urban proletariat. As *Sarlo* expanded its contact with other worker and leftist non-ethnic Hungarian organizations the distance between it, mainstream student organizations, and the political establishments in Hungary and Czechoslovakia increased. After *Sarlo* leaders openly repudiated revisionism and declared for a Danubian Confederation in March 1930, Hungarian authorities banned *Sarlo* members from entering Hungary, denouncing them as "traitors" and "tools of the Czech state." (p. 271) Although *Sarlo* lost clout in Hungary, its ties with Hungarian populist literati remained strong, it retained influence over ethnic Hungarian student groups outside of Hungary, and it even persuaded Czechoslovak President T.G. Masaryk to found a Czechoslovak Hungarian Academy.

Spurned by Hungary and the mainstream Hungarian political parties in Czechoslovakia, *Sarlo* focused more on the plight of peasants and workers. Class struggle supplanted the nurturing of a Hungarian cultural identity as *Sarlo*'s goal, accelerated by the onset of depression. *Sarlo* soon ran afoul of Czech authorities as a result of its increasing ties to the Left, its involvement in the 1931 Whitsuntide Massacre in Kosuty, and its surreptitious resurrection of a statue of Sandor Petofi in Bratislava. Its 1931 sociographic summer trips were its last major success, after which the movement gradually collapsed.

Cornelius persuasively demonstrates that *Sarlo* was eventually estranged from other Hungarian groups in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. While her work addresses the dynamic of how marginal groups interact with the establishment, she leaves unanswered questions concerning *Sarlo*'s relation to other Hungarian organizations. By doing so, she may have overstated the radicalization of *Sarlo*, underestimated its pedagogical legacy, and oversimplified the rifts that plagued the Hungarian community in the *Felvidek*. She states that the Slovak-Hungarian political establishment, with the exception of the Social Democrats, never trusted *Sarlo*, deeming it too revolutionary. Likewise, *Sarlo* leaders viewed all but the Social

Democrats and Communists as reactionary. However, Cornelius writes that the main sources of *Sarlo* financial support through late-1931 were the Czechoslovak-Hungarian Freemasons. If not part of the political establishment, who were the Masons and what were their motives in supporting Sarlo? Conversely, how did *Sarlo* leaders rationalize accepting the Masons' aid?

Second, Cornelius does not mention the Prohaszka Circles, an omission that may have cost her the chance to claim a more enduring *Sarlo* legacy. The Prohaszka Circles, according to Margit Balogh's recent book on the National Association of Young Christian Agrarian Journeymen (KALOT), existed alongside the *Sarlo* movement in Slovakia, occupied the political center, and were the "most important assemblies of Slovak Hungarian Youth."[1] Balogh claims that, as *Sarlo*'s influence declined and the organization disintegrated in 1933-34, Catholic youth organizations emerged in the Slovak lands. These associations endorsed a vision of *magyarsag* that saw Hungarian unity under the umbrella of the Catholic Church and coopted *Sarlo* strategies by launching village sociography campaigns. Perhaps the most direct intellectual descendants of the *Sarlo* movement were not the populists in Hungary, as Cornelius writes, but rather the Hungarian Catholic youth in Slovakia.

Cornelius hints that religious influence in the Slovak lands may have grown during the Depression: she informs us that squalor and unemployment pushed Hungarian villagers towards alcohol and "religious sects which promised a better future." (p. 311) Otherwise, the growing influence of Catholic youth organizations goes unmentioned. Instead, Cornelius presents us with a black-and-white picture of Hungarian speakers in Slovakia and Ruthenia divided between uninformed, disconnected traditional elites on the one hand and a revolutionary peasantry and proletariat organized into "one of the most radical and also the best organized [worker-peasant movements] in all of Europe" (p. 308) on the other.[2] This portrait exaggerates the radicalism of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian minority while not giving Catholic organizations their due. Including discussion of *Sarlo*'s ties with Catholic youth groups might have allowed Cornelius to give readers a more nuanced sense of the political rifts in the *Felvidek* Hungarian community.

Cornelius' primary arguments for the uniqueness of *Sarlo* are that, as an organization, it transcended class, social status, religion, and even politics. Her success in substantiating these claims varies. She proves that *Sarlo* was able to attract members of varied status and economic origin, showing that *Sarlo* members came from families with roots in the old Hungarian gentry, the poor peasantry, the bureaucratic middle classes and the urban proletariat. Cornelius' argument that *Sarlo* was religiously mixed is less convincing. While *Sarlo* members came from the Catholic and Protestant faiths, not one of those highlighted in the book is Jewish. Hungarian Jews in Czechoslovakia were highly represented in many of the Scout troops (p. 122) and university programs that were *Sarlo*'s wellsprings. Whether they became leaders or even participated in *Sarlo* is a question Cornelius chooses not to investigate. The absence of Jews from Cornelius' analysis suggests that *Sarlo* may not have been so religiously diverse and that its open concept of *magyarsag* may not have been as inclusive or attractive in practice. On the other hand, there may have been *Sarlo* members of a variety of faiths. That Cornelius does not provide us with an answer to this question points to one of her book's main drawbacks: its lack of sociological data.

It is ironic that a book about a Czechoslovak-Hungarian youth movement whose *raison d'etre* was demography does not include vital information on the numbers and origin of its members. This may be due to an absence of extant archival evidence and not a fault of the author. However, the lack of data concerning *Sarlo*'s overall membership, in particular its class, religious, gender and age breakdown, presents a serious methodological problem for the author. While Cornelius asserts that the movement was informal and the leadership was representative of a mixed *Sarlo* membership, the reader has no way of evaluating her generalizations about the character of *Sarlo* and is forced to accept them on faith.

This points to an additional difficulty Cornelius confronted in her work, which she writes "to provide a more objective portrait" of *Sarlo*. (p. 16) To compensate for minimal primary evidence, Cornelius utilizes interviews, autobiographies, and exchanges of letters with former *Sarlo* activists or their immediate offspring. This method adds fresh perspectives, but it can also lend itself to hagiography and a blunting of the author's critical perspective, something Cornelius herself briefly acknowledges.

I offer one example: Cornelius argues that passivity is the reason women did not rise to leadership positions in *Sarlo*. It was not that women were not involved; in fact many *Sarlo* members found spouses in the movement. Rather, according to Cornelius, the *Sarlo* women were in a more vulnerable position and "consciously underplayed their Hungarian identity." (p. 97) Cornelius does

not actually analyze why this occurred, but implies that it was a reflection of the general powerlessness of women in interwar Czechoslovakia and that their citizenship and nationality were derived, according to Czechoslovak law, through their fathers or husbands.

This explanation is insufficient. Among the states of Central Europe between the wars, women in Czechoslovakia enjoyed the greatest political power and opportunity. Instead of exploring other alternatives, particularly the gender dynamic within *Sarlo* and how it might have hindered the ascension of women to leadership positions, Cornelius quotes only anecdotal evidence from interviews and women's biographies, painting a traditional picture of admirable, strong, intelligent, but family oriented women. Why more women, whom politicians and academics alike have labeled the keepers of national culture, would not join *Sarlo* and advance deserves greater analysis.

Cornelius should be applauded for her research efforts, tracking down surviving *Sarlo* members in Europe and America. However, she leaves untapped many primary and secondary sources that might have strengthened her book. Her bibliography includes no material from any Czech, Slovak, or Hungarian archive other than the *Sarlo* Archive in Debrecen. Relevant material specific to *Sarlo* exists in the Hungarian National Archives Foreign Ministry and Interior Ministry holdings.[3] The Budapest collections of the Socialist and Communist parties likely contain reports on and from Czechoslovakia. These sources might yield greater insights into how Hungary's political elites viewed the activities of *Sarlo*, what aspects *Sarlo*'s *magyarsag* they accepted or rejected, and the degree of *Sarlo*'s radicalization.

Cornelius' secondary sources are also limited. For example, her discussion of nationalism theory is confined largely to Anderson and Hobsbawm, despite the fact that *Sarlo* – which declared that it was not race and blood that defined Hungarianness, but a cultural-historical legacy as a distinct Danubian people forever surrounded by other ethnic groups – could be a case study straight out of Anthony Smith. Nor does the author take advantage of the large literature on scouting, especially newer research on the British Scouts and Girl Guides that challenges the notion scouting was a classless and internationalist movement. These texts too could have given her arguments a greater sense of comparison and depth.

Like the *Sarlo* movement, Cornelius contributes to our knowledge of the Hungarian minority in interwar Czechoslovakia, showing us how a new generation navigated through the turbid waters mixing cultural national identity and ideology. Like the group she studies, Cornelius succeeds in mobilizing the younger generation. Her daughter, Krisztina Fehervary, drew the majority of the maps that accompany the text and served as an editor. But again, similar to *Sarlo*, this work has shortcomings that prevent it from achieving its potential.

Notes:

[1]. Margit Balogh, *KALOT es a katolikus tarsadalompolitika 1935-46* (Budapest: MTA Tortenettudomany Intezete, 1998), p. 23.

[2]. Cornelius' source about the radicalism of the Slovak-Hungarian Worker-Peasant Movement is the Czechoslovak-Hungarian Marxist Viliam Plezva's *Napjaink tortenelme: fejezetek a csehszlovakiai forradalmi mozgalom tortenetebol* ([Bratislava]: Madach-Pravda, 1976), p. 140.

[3]. See Bela Albertini's _A Sarlo szociofotos vonulata (Bratislava: Madach, 1993), which utilizes Interior Ministry documents.

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